THE METHODIST CLASS-MEETING

GILBERT MURRAY

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THE METHODIST CLASS-MEETING

BY
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Go, little Book! from this my solitude,
I cast thee on the waters,—go thy ways;
And if, as I believe, thy vein is good,
The world will find thee after many days.
Be it with thee according to thy worth;
Go, little Book! In faith I send thee forth.

SOUTHEY.

Div. S.
264.8
W977m

To My Wife

'Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what He hath done for my soul.'

THE PSALMIST.

'Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name. And they shall be Mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up My jewels.'

THE PROPHET.

'That which we have seen and heard, declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ.'

THE APOSTLE.

INTRODUCTORY

When at first I took my pen in hand
Thus for to write, I did not understand
That I at all should make a little book
In such a mode; nay, I had undertook
To make another, which, when almost done,
Before I was aware I this begun.

BUNYAN'S *Apologia.*

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PREFACE

It has seemed to me to be a wise thing to take advantage of the revived interest in the subject of the Class-meeting, and to discuss, somewhat fully, the rise, purpose, and ministry of this historic institution.

I believe that we have only to inform ourselves on these matters to be in a position readily to answer the important questions which are repeatedly asked.

I have refrained from dealing with the controversy upon the class-meeting as a *Test of Membership*. My sole purpose is to re-emphasize the importance of this institution as an effective and necessary *Means of Grace.*

In pursuance of this object, I have drawn largely upon the records of Wesley's life and work, deeming it to be of the first importance that his voice should be heard in matters of interpretation. When speaking of Methodism, I have in mind Methodism as a whole. If any particular branch of this world-wide Family is meant, the name is definitely given.

I sincerely hope that the book will find its way

into every Methodist home. Its appeal is equally to the Methodist of Britain and to the Methodist *beyond* Britain—to every kindred, every tribe, where the flag of Methodism has been unfurled.

Literature dealing with this subject is singularly scarce. I have carefully read what books and pamphlets I could procure, and my obligations are due to several writers, whose names are mentioned, for the most part, *in loco*.

I pray that Almighty God will bless this labour of love, and grant that it may play some part in strengthening and even enhancing the ministry of the Methodist Class-meeting.

INTRODUCTORY

THE class-meeting has an abiding interest for all branches of the Methodist Family. However much these differ in minor details, they are one in their praise of this institution. Most Methodists revere the class-meeting because it bears the marks of the genius of John Wesley, and was commended by him as one of the greatest helps towards holy living. They also revere it for its own sake. 'I looked then after Christian, to see him go up the hill, where I perceived he fell from running to going, and from going to clambering upon his hands and knees, because of the steepness of the place. Now about the mid-way to the top of the hill was a pleasant arbour, made by the Lord of the hill for the refreshment of weary travellers.'[1] To scores of people, the class-meeting has been *a pleasant arbour* by the wayside of life. Here the troubled have been assured, the lonely have made congenial friendships, the tired have felt the inrush of new and overpowering emotion, and those who groped amid darkness have seen a great light. 'The class-meeting is a holy place in Methodism. Her membership has found it marvellously adapted to the nurture of Christian character, and there live few true Methodists who do not thank God for the Methodist class-meeting.'[2] 'The unspeakable usefulness of the institution has been more and more manifest.'[3]

The class-meeting is an essential part of Methodism. It is its differentiating characteristic. It occupies the central place in the Methodist economy, around which the other institutions gather, and from which they derive much of their efficiency. 'The true and proper Methodist class-meeting is the inmost institution of the Methodist Church, the germ cell—to borrow an illustration from vegetable physiology—out of which the whole tissue and texture of Methodism is perpetually reproduced and developed. The

[1] *Pilgrim's Progress.* [2] Wm. McMullen in *Toronto Guardian.*
[3] Wesley's *Journal*, i., p. 342.

Methodist Church is a contexture, a web of such class-meetings; do away with these classes and the whole web, the whole vital growth and structure of Methodism, is destroyed.'[1]

John Wesley seems to have regarded the class-meeting in much the same light. Wherever converts were made, he formed them immediately into a class, and when he visited places where societies were established he never failed to give particular attention to the class, and carefully to examine the members. In the *Journal* there is this suggestive entry: 'I met the (Norwich) Society at five, and explained the nature and use of meeting in class. Upon inquiry, I found we have now about five hundred members. But an hundred and fifty of these do not pretend to meet at all. *Of those, therefore, I make no account. They hang on but a single thread.*'[2]

Just now, interest in the class-meeting is especially keen. This is largely due to the discussions that have taken place upon the question of the test of church membership. Some have deprecated these discussions. They regard them as the evidence of the existence of a grave dissatisfaction with historic methods, and of an ominous desire for something new. But is this fair?

As a matter of fact, these discussions have proved very advantageous. They have revived interest in the class-meeting—and that surely is a good thing. The class-meeting has suffered in consequence of a widespread indifference to its claims and utility. 'I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down.'[3] This is at once the history, and its interpretation, of many a class-meeting. But there are signs that a change has taken place. The attention of Methodists has been re-arrested, with the result that they are devoting themselves to a consideration of the question with a freshness and candour that augur well for the future.

These discussions have driven back Methodists to a study

[1] Rigg: *The Class-meeting Fellowship*, p. 11.

[2] Vol. II., p. 487 (the italics are the author's). [3] Prov. xxiv. 30, 31.

of their origins—and that is an additional advantage. They find it necessary to consult with John Wesley. They wish to hear through the pages of history what he thought and how he advised. The study of the rise and development of the class-meeting brings its own reward, as many can testify. It reveals the greatness of the founder of Methodism, his quick responsiveness to divine guidance, and his fine abandonment to the work. It also proves that he never ventured upon new methods without careful forethought and earnest prayer. John Wesley was no ruthless innovator. He moved forward, gradually building up the great organization which is his lasting memorial, as God seemed to direct and circumstances required. And it brings one into touch with the momentous occurrences of those early days. It is impossible to dwell upon the story of the Great Revival without feeling the thrill of that holy passion which stirred the heart of England. Indeed, it is only necessary to read a few pages to become conscious that the fire of evangelism is kindled anew.

Moreover, these discussions have made for the truth. And to know the truth, even about the genesis and ministry of the class-meeting, is vital. Error, misunderstanding, can serve no good purpose. 'And error is never so dangerous as when it is the alloy of truth. Pure error would be rejected; but error mixed with truth makes use of the truth as a pioneer for it, and gets introduction where otherwise it would have none. Poison is never so dangerous as when mixed up with food; error is never so likely to do mischief as when it comes to us under the pretensions and patronage of that which is true.'[1] It is better to have the truth, even though it may involve the surrender of some of our own cherished ideas. The truth makes free, and freedom is an imperative condition of progress and enduring strength. Hospitality to the whole truth—such is the counsel of wisdom.

All truth is calm,
  Refuge and rock and tower;
The more of truth the more of calm,
  Its calmness is its power. —A. Bonar.

[1] Dr. Cumming.

A STATEMENT

OF ITS GENESIS

OF ITS DESIGN

OF ITS MINISTRY

OF ITS DECLINATION

Few know of life's beginnings—men behold
The good achieved,
They count not life's first steps, and never think
Upon the many miserable hours
When hope deferr'd was sickness to the heart.

—LANDON.

THE METHODIST CLASS-MEETING

OF ITS GENESIS

THE Methodist Class-meeting came into existence as the result not of one circumstance, but of many. It was the final expression of a process of orderly development. One step, taken to meet a pressing need, suggested another, and so on, until the leaders of the Revival Movement found themselves in possession of an institution which, while complete in itself, was singularly adapted for an urgent and important work.

When in 1739 the Wesleys invaded London with their gospel of a present, full, and free salvation, they met with immediate and startling success. It seemed as if the Metropolis, tired of the formalism which held religion in its grip, had long waited for their coming. Crowds of eager listeners followed the evangelists, and, though some cavilled at their message, many

acknowledged the convincing power of the truth and professed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The success itself was embarrassing. Converts wandered about like sheep without shepherds; for their clergymen denounced the evangelists, and refused to have anything to do with those who attended the conventicle services. 'One, and another, and another came to us,' says Wesley, 'asking what they should do, being distressed on every side, as every one strove to weaken, and none to strengthen, their hands in God. We advised them, "Strengthen you one another. Talk together as often as you can. And pray earnestly with and for one another, so that you may endure to the end, and be saved." Against this advice we presumed there could be no objection; as being grounded on the plainest reason, and on so many Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and New, that it would be tedious to recite them.

'They said, "But we want you likewise to talk with us often, to direct and quicken us in our way, to give us the advice which you well know we need, and to pray with us, as well as for us." I asked, "Which of you desire this? let me know your names and places of abode." They did so. But I soon found that they were too many for one to talk with severally

so often as they wanted it. So I told them, "If you will all of you come together every Thursday in the evening, I will gladly spend some time with you in prayer, and give you the best advice I can." '

Thus arose, without any previous design on either side, what we afterwards called *a Society*; a very innocent name, and very common in London, for any number of people associating themselves together. The thing proposed in their associating themselves together was obvious to every one. They wanted to 'flee from the wrath to come,' and to assist each other in so doing. They therefore united themselves 'in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation.'[1] This occurred at the end of the year 1739.

In most places where Wesley preached, he repeated the experiment of London and formed Societies. This was true of Bristol and Kingswood and Newcastle-on-Tyne. Even in Scotland and Ireland the presence of flourishing societies testified to the real and abiding good that was accomplished. In every case the experiment proved a gratifying success. The Society became the centre of activity. Wesley looked to it to protect converts against the snares that so

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 248, et seq.

frequently beset them, to provide an opportunity for prayer and mutual exhortation, and to serve as a channel along which the blessings of salvation might pass to a wider circle. 'The far greater part of those who had begun to "fear God, and work righteousness," but were not united together, grew faint in their minds, and fell back into what they were before. Meanwhile the far greater part of those who were thus united together continued "striving to enter in at the strait gate," and "to lay hold on eternal life."'[1]

But useful as the institution of the *Society* proved, it did not meet all the needs of the converts. Those in London who solicited the good offices of Wesley expressly said, 'We want *you* to talk with us often, to direct and quicken us in our way, to give us the advices which *you* well know we need, and to pray *with us*, as well as *for us*.' But as the itinerancy of Wesley became more extensive and the number of societies increased, this plainly was impossible. Even the powers of that herculean apostle had their limitations. In some cases quite a long time elapsed between his visits to respective societies, with the result that the members did not always agree among themselves, or remember the high purposes for which they were bound together. Moreover, the societies

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 250.

were too large to permit of that individual treatment which to Wesley appeared so very important. He himself could only address the members collectively, and make a cursory examination of their walk and conduct.

Wesley keenly felt the shortcomings of the Society, and saw the need for some further arrangement, a development that would touch the very heart of the movement. 'As much as we endeavoured to watch over each other, we soon found some who did not live the gospel. I do not know that any hypocrites were crept in; for indeed there was no temptation. But several grew cold, and gave way to the sins which had long easily beset them. We quickly perceived there were many ill consequences of suffering these to remain among us. It was dangerous to others, inasmuch as all sin is of an infectious nature. It brought such a scandal on their brethren as exposed them to what was not properly the reproach of Christ. It laid a stumbling-block in the way of others, and caused the truth to be evil spoken of. We groaned under these inconveniences long before a remedy could be found.'[1]

The honour of discovering the remedy belonged to the Society at Bristol. From the first, Bristol

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 225.

extended a royal welcome to the Wesleys, and their brilliant coadjutor, George Whitefield. The earnestness of the evangelists appealed to the generous impulses of the sturdy colliers of Kingswood. Immense crowds stood spell-bound under the message of the Cross, and many of them surrendered to the sovereign rights of the Son of God.

It was in connexion with the affairs of the chapel at Bristol, the first Methodist chapel in the world, that the suggestion was made, which Wesley hailed as the promise of a solution of those difficulties which the societies had revealed. In February, 1742, many of the members of the Bristol Society assembled together to discuss the financial needs of their chapel, and to devise, if possible, means whereby these might be met, ' when one, Captain Foy, stood up and said, " Let every member of the Society give a penny a week till all (bills) are paid." Another answered, " But many of them are poor, and cannot afford to do it." " Then," said he, " put eleven of the poorest with me ; and if they can give anything, well : I will call on them weekly ; and if they can give nothing, I will give for them as well as for myself. And each of you call on eleven of your neighbours weekly and receive what they give, and make up what is

wanting.'' '[1] The suggestion met with general approval. It appeared to be a feasible way of overcoming their financial troubles. Hence reliable persons were chosen and entrusted with the work.

But these leaders, as they were soon called, did more than collect the weekly contributions. They came into touch with the members of the Society in their homes, and what they sometimes saw was far from creditable to those concerned. The leaders met with cases of glaring inconsistency, members who were openly disloyal to Jesus Christ. They reported the offenders to Wesley, and he at once felt that here at last was the very device for which he had long been seeking. He called the leaders together and informed them that, in addition to their financial duties they must make it a matter of serious concern to inquire particularly into the behaviour of those whom they saw weekly. 'The business of the leader is to see each person in his class, once a week at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort, as occasion may require, to receive what they are willing to give towards the relief of the poor.'[2]

The arrangement proved of inestimable advantage. The leaders carried out their duties with commendable

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 252. [2] Ibid.

regularity and discretion. They visited the members in their homes, and gave them such spiritual advice as might help them to wage a good warfare. Those of the members whom they found to be plainly unfit for membership were removed from the roll, while others, who were in danger of degenerating into mischief-makers, were, by this timely and judicious ministry, saved from such a calamity and kept in happy fellowship with the Society.

But the perfect remedy, which Wesley was so anxious to discover, had not yet appeared. The appointment of class-leaders marked a great advance towards the ideal, but it was not itself the ideal. The leaders met with many and serious difficulties in the discharge of their duties, and until these difficulties were removed the work was sure to suffer.

For instance, the leaders found that the visitation of each member at his own house took up more time than they could spare. Many of them belonged to the great industrial section of the community, and much of their time was necessarily employed in following their daily occupation. They felt it too great a tax upon them to visit the whole circle of their membership, converse with them on religious matters, collect the gifts for the poor, and do this weekly. Then, there were many of the members who

lived with masters, mistresses, or relations. These were not willing that a stranger should call once a week to interview their servants or relations. In some cases the masters were openly hostile to the Methodist movement and would not tolerate any intercourse with its officers, while others viewed Methodism with suspicion, and did not hesitate to extend that suspicion to the evangelists and their helpers. On several occasions the leaders called at the members' homes to find that they were entertaining company. This, of course, prevented them carrying out the purposes of the visitation and made their work futile. Moreover, there was a lack of that *esprit de corps* which is so essential to the best interests of any organized community. Members found fault with each other. Petty differences were magnified, until they threatened to do serious injury. One member contradicted the statement of another. And so there seemed no hope of preserving concord and goodwill.

Wesley quickly saw these defects, and agreed with the leaders that some additional arrangement, a further development of the original idea, must if possible be made. It did not take long to decide as to what this should be. It was only a matter of pressing forward another step, of placing the top-stone

upon the edifice which had gradually been erected. After due consideration it was decided that each leader, instead of visiting the homes of the members weekly, should meet his class at an appointed place, inquire into the spiritual condition of each member, advise, reprove, and instruct as circumstances seemed to demand, and then conclude with prayer and thanksgiving.

This improvement at once justified itself. The leaders were freed from the heavy task of going from house to house, the same opportunity for fellowship was extended to all the members, whether employers or employed, and the danger of strife was minimized by the leader being able to deal with misunderstandings and disagreements while the disputants were together.

Thus, probably towards the close of 1742, was finally completed the establishment of the class-meeting, an institution which has ever since been of inestimable worth to Methodism. The formative period extended over something like three years. There was 'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.' The Society was the germinant seed, and from it there gradually developed the blade of the class-meeting, i.e. the appointment of leaders to collect the weekly pence, each from

twelve members; then came the ear, i.e. the regulation that the leaders must inquire into the personal conduct of each member; and finally appeared the full corn in the ear, i.e. the weekly meeting of the class with its leader, in one appointed place.

Wesley was profoundly grateful for the providence which had led to such a wise and durable settlement. 'It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential regulation. Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began "to bear one another's burdens," and naturally to "care for each other." As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other.'[1]

A Methodist historian says: 'In this manner originated one of the most distinctive features of Methodism—the advantages of which are beyond estimation. The class-meeting has, more than any other means, preserved the original purity and vigour of Methodism. . . . The class-leader became a substitute for the preacher in this department of his office. The fruits of an itinerant ministry must have disappeared in many, perhaps most, places during the long interval which elapsed between the

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 254

visits of the earlier preachers, had they not been preserved by the class-meeting. A small class has been the nucleus of almost every church which Methodism has formed.'[1]

(1) The genesis of the class-meeting seems to have been the result of a train of accidental circumstances. Indeed, many of those events in the historic period of 1738-1743 might be regarded in the same light. Wesley's preaching campaign throughout the Metropolis, his visit to Bristol and Kingswood, where 'he submitted to become more vile' by preaching in the open air, his subsequent return to London, and the formation of the first Society, took place without any real premeditation on his part. In his *Plain Account* he expressly says: 'I must premise, that as they (the Methodists) had not the least expectation, at first, of anything like what has since followed, so they had no previous design or plan at all; but everything arose just as the occasion offered.'[2]

This was particularly true of the establishment of the class-meeting. Captain Foy's suggestion that leaders should be appointed to collect weekly pence appeared as nothing more than a simple

[1] Stevens' *Methodism*, ii., p. 338.
[2] *Works*, viii., 248.

idea, that might or might not be helpful in solving the difficulties of Bristol Chapel. No one believed that he was laying the foundation stone of an institution which would become world-wide in its observance and abiding in its influence. The leaders had no ulterior plans when they waited upon Wesley and reported how they had discovered many irregularities among the members. And Wesley himself was, so far as he knew, only providing for the pressing needs of the moment, when he ordained that the classes should meet in an appointed place once a week, and receive the ministrations of the class-leader.

But the witness of history refuses to confirm the idea that the introduction and establishment of the class-meeting was the work of chance. It points to the fact of an over-ruling Providence, 'a Divinity shapening the ends, rough-hew them how men will.' Pope says:—

> All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
> All chance, *direction which thou canst not see.*

Wesley believed that he was in the hands of God. He believed that he had been led into the great and exacting work of the Revival by the Holy Spirit. He believed that, in that work, the Holy Spirit would direct his steps and supply his need and provide for

every development. Herein lay the greatness of the man. The Lordship of Jesus Christ was complete in the realm of his life. There was no such thing as chance. Wesley was guided step after step in that marvellous development from the Methodist Society to the Methodist class-meeting. 'Wesley's legislative wisdom shows itself not so much in inventing the peculiarities of Methodism, as in appropriating skilfully the means which were providentially provided for him. Its elementary parts were evolved unexpectedly in the progress of the denomination. Wesley saw that the state of religion throughout the English nation required a thorough reform; God, he believed, would provide for whatever was necessary to be done in such a necessity, if willing and earnest men would attempt to do it. He was ready to attempt it, and to be sacrificed for it. He looked not into the future, but consulted only the openings of his present duty.'[1]

(2) But the class-meeting had its fore-gleams. One can scarcely read the device that Wesley adopted at Bristol for meeting the irregularities of members and instructing them in the principles of godliness without thinking of the similar gatherings which obtained among the Moravians, and which the

[1] Stevens' *Methodism*, ii., p. 337.

Wesleys had so frequently attended. There are great and striking differences between the two organizations, but the one is an irresistible reminder of the other. The duty of self-examination was enforced in both cases. Meditation and prayer were also among the prescribed rules. It is an easy journey from the Moravian Society meeting to a Methodist class-meeting.

The class-meeting also points back to the Oxford Holy Club. Fortunately, it is altogether free from the asceticism that tainted the religious fervour of those dozen members of the University. But the rules of the Holy Club foreshadow the obligations that were placed upon the leaders of Methodism. It has been said that the Holy Club was the precursor of the class-meeting, and that in the club Wesley received a training which served him in good stead in latter days.

Moreover, the Puritans greatly prized fellowship meetings. Certain parts of the *Pilgrim's Progress* go to show that John Bunyan was familiar with them, and valued very highly the advantages they bestowed. It is not difficult to trace the line backwards, through the Brotherhood of the Middle Ages, to the early days of the Christian Church. Luke, the inspired historian of the Acts of the Apostles, says: 'And day by day,

continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the Church daily those that were being saved.'[1] Wesley pointed out how the Methodist Society had its counterpart in the Early Church, and his words are equally true of the inner circle of the Society, i.e. the class. 'Upon reflection, I could not but observe this is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity. In the earliest times, those whom God had sent forth "preached the gospel to every creature." And, "the body of hearers" were mostly either Jews or heathens. But as soon as any of these were so convinced of the truth as to forsake sin, and seek the gospel salvation, they immediately joined them together, took an account of their names, advised them to watch over each other, and met their "catechumens" apart from the congregation, that they might instruct, rebuke, exhort and pray with them, and for them, according to their several necessities.'[2]

[1] Acts ii. 46-47. [2] *Works*, viii., p. 250.

OF ITS DESIGN

IT is a mistake to say that the class-meeting was first instituted only for financial purposes. Such a statement indicates either ignorance of the events of the earliest years of Methodism, or confusion of thought in dealing with the order of their occurrence. What came into being as the result of the suggestion of Captain Foy at Bristol was not the class-meeting, any more than the undeveloped bud is the flower of the fragrant rose. It was the first movement towards the class-meeting, the blade which sprang from the germinant seed, the Society, and which gave promise of something more in the future. Wesley never spoke of this as the class-meeting. The eleven names associated with that of the principal made up a class, and the principal himself was styled the leader; but there was no class-meeting. The leader fulfilled his duties by visiting from house to house.

It was when the leaders complained of the difficulties that beset their work, and Wesley adopted the device of requiring the members of each class weekly to meet their respective leaders in an appointed place, that the class-meeting proper appeared. After this, Wesley spoke freely of it, and enlarged upon the many benefits it brought to Methodism. The design of the class-meeting, therefore, was not simply financial. Wesley had in mind something far greater and more beneficial.

Nor is it correct to say that the class-meeting was only a temporary expedient, a kind of panacea for the evils that afflicted the young community, to be dismissed as soon as those evils disappeared. This is a favourite argument of the opponents of this institution. They say that Wesley adopted this method of dealing with the members of the societies because, as might be expected, there were many false professors who attached themselves to the Revival Movement and whose conduct brought discredit upon the work.

But there is no proof that Wesley viewed the class-meeting in this light. A study of the *Journal* will leave a different impression upon the mind. For instance, as soon as Wesley discovered the class-meeting, he felt that here was something which

would exactly meet the needs both of the present and the future. 'It can scarcely be imagined what advantages have been reaped from this little prudential arrangement.' During his evangelistic tours he established the class-meeting in many towns. Of London he wrote: 'This was the origin of our classes at London, for which I can never sufficiently praise God; the unspeakable usefulness of the institution having ever since been more and more manifest.'[1] He carefully visited the classes, explained, as at Norwich, the nature and use of meeting in class, and declined to recognize as members those who wilfully neglected this means of grace.[2] The duties imposed upon the leaders have no suggestion of the provisional. They have proved singularly adaptable to the needs of more than one generation of Methodists. Indeed, it is evident that, when Wesley instituted the class-meeting upon its final basis, he had much more in mind than merely a temporary expedient.

(1) Undoubtedly Wesley purposed that by this means the members of the various societies should be brought into fellowship with each other. They belonged to the most diverse sections of the community and seemed to have very little in common.

[1] *Journal*, i., p. 342 [2] Ibid., ii., p. 487.

Moreover, 'they were scattered so widely in all parts of the town, from Wapping to Westminster.' There was no bond of union. Each went his own way and was not heard of until the next Society gathering. It appeared very desirable to Wesley to rectify this state of things. He was persuaded that it militated against the success of the cause. Personal acquaintance between the members, friendly intercourse about matters touching their religious experience, mutual recognitions elsewhere than at the meetings of the Society, were essential factors in any future progress; and Wesley knew it. Hence the class-meeting. By means of this weekly gathering Wesley hoped that his people would be drawn closer together, that they would develop a sincere interest in each other's good, that they would present to the world an object-lesson of mutual love and goodwill, and prove that such concord 'is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion.'[1]

(2) Wesley also intended to lay emphasis upon the idea of Christian brotherhood.

[1] Ps. cxxxiii. 1.

The value of this he had seen elsewhere. At Herrnhut, the Moravian settlement which he visited immediately after his conversion, he witnessed a representation which made a lasting impression upon him. The members of that Moravian Brotherhood certainly lived in the spirit of Charles Wesley's famous hymn.

> Help us to help each other, Lord,
> Each other's cross to bear,
> Let each his friendly aid afford,
> And feel his brother's care.

It was just the kind of association likely to appeal to Wesley. And he remained a convinced believer in its superlative value. But as a member of the Holy Club at Oxford he had himself experienced some of the benefits of such an association. The members of the Holy Club had a common platform; social differences were forgotten. They pursued the same ideals and 'helped to build each other up.' Wesley was anxious to develop the same spirit of comradeship among the converts of the Revival. Henry Ward Beecher once said: 'Every one entering a church has a right to feel that he is going into a higher atmosphere than that in which he has been accustomed to move. Every one has a right to feel that when he goes into the Church of Christ he goes into an association, a brotherhood, where the principle of gentleness and kindness is carried on to a higher

degree than it is outside of the Church.' That evidently was the view of Wesley and one of the objects he desired to attain in the class-meeting. However much people differed in their social positions and tastes, it was necessary, both for their own sakes and for the sake of new adherents, that they stood shoulder to shoulder, and freely recognized each other as brethren in Christ. And in the class-meeting this requirement was fostered and exemplified. The class ' is no other than a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united, in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.'

(3) Wesley instituted the class-meeting to serve also as a check to irregularities among professed members and a protection of the good name of Methodism. The organization of the Society was not sufficient. Irregularities continued to increase in spite of the most vigilant oversight. ' The people were scattered so widely in all parts of the town, from Wapping to Westminster, that I could not easily see what the behaviour of each person in his own neighbourhood was, so that several disorderly walkers did much hurt before I was apprised of it.'

The matter was brought to a head in consequence of the report of the leaders of Bristol. They were shocked by what they discovered. Wesley not only felt the truth of their findings, but also discovered in their conduct a probable solution. He placed before them his scheme, and they accepted it. And when, for a second time, they waited upon him because of the difficulties that still remained, he modified his original scheme in such a way that the class-meeting might put an end both to disorderly walkers and to painful misunderstandings among the members. The lever by which this arrangement worked was the leader. He was to meet his class regularly, inquire into the conduct of each member, admonish, counsel, or encourage, as circumstances required, and report any who persisted in creating strife or walking contrary to the Christian precepts. As a further guarantee, Wesley instituted the quarterly visitation of the class. 'In order to do this, I determined at least once in three months to talk with every member myself, and to inquire of their own mouths, as well as of their leaders and neighbours, whether they grew in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. At these seasons I likewise particularly inquire whether there be any misunderstanding or difference among them; that every

hindrance of peace and brotherly love may be taken out of the way.'[1]

(4) A further design of the class-meeting was that it might provide means for the cultivation of personal religion. Many of the converts of Methodism were gathered from the poorer sections of the towns and villages of England. Their education had been wofully neglected. Elementary education on a large scale was not even imagined. Moreover, the clergy of the time seemed to take very little interest in their cures. They went so far as strenuously to oppose the preaching of the evangelists. High and low were deprived of the means necessary to strengthen and develop the good they had received through the Revival. This was the reason which led the London deputation to wait upon Wesley with the request that he would meet them and give them instruction in holy things. Wesley saw the urgency of the need. It was not enough for men to repent of sin and turn to God. If their newly-born resolutions were to be worth anything, he and his coadjutors must adopt means to help them, to find out their mental difficulties and to render timely assistance.

The class-meeting was the very thing, 'the very

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 256.

thing we wanted so long.' It provided the opportunity of intercourse on religious questions; it brought the leader into direct contact with each member and enabled him to give suitable advice; it supplied a most valuable means for the deeper cultivation of religious life. 'Speaking the truth in love, they grew up into Him in all things who is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, increased unto the edifying itself in love.'

Dr. Sutherland, of Toronto, writes: 'It should be borne in mind that the class-meeting was designed for the instruction and help of those who are concerned about salvation, who have a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.' Another Methodist historian testifies: 'It was in these circumstances that the class-meeting was instituted, when personal and direct instruction, encouragement afforded on the duty of believing in the Saviour, and express advice and sympathy on the respective subjects of experience and the painful exercises of the divine life, were not only useful, but, in keeping up the spirit of true religion, absolutely essential.'[1]

[1] Dixon, *Methodism and Its Origin*.

(5) Finally, this institution was intended to serve financial ends. If the great genius of the founder of Methodism is apparent in other details of the Methodist economy, it shows itself especially in finance. Wesley accepted the suggestion of Captain Foy as being a solution for the difficulties of Bristol Chapel, but his keen insight went far beyond that temporary need. The new organization, that was so quickly forming itself, would require funds. Many of the members were too poor to do much. But the system of paying one penny a week placed the possibility of sharing in the financial responsibilities of the work within the reach of every one. Wesley believed in regular support. He considered it much better that all should give a little than that a few should give much. By so doing, all would share in the blessings which are attendant upon generous and whole-hearted giving, and also feel a mutual concern for the financial side of the work.

Therefore, when the Bristol Chapel was lifted out of its difficulties, the weekly payment system was continued, but diverted to a fund for the poor ; and, when later the lay ministry arose, the contributions of the classes formed the basis of its support. The class-meeting stood for the systematic support of God's work. It inculcated and developed the habit

in all the members of giving cheerfully as God had blessed them. 'The class rule of a penny a week and a shilling a quarter has effectively been the basis of Methodist finance.'[1]

The design, therefore, which Wesley had in organizing and establishing the class-meeting was very complex. At first he thought only of the needs of the Bristol Trust, but from that starting-point he worked forwards, until by the time he completed the organization his intentions covered a wide and varied field. He put down the keel of the vessel, thinking only, perhaps, to meet a pressing emergency, but ere the upper parts were finished and the rigging was made secure and the vessel was ready to skip the restless waters of the mighty deep, he found that it was eminently adapted to convey its passengers into many parts and to land them safely upon the most enchanting shores.

[1] Stevens' *Methodism*, ii., p. 356.

OF ITS MINISTRY

IT soon became apparent that the class-meeting had come to stay. It was just the kind of institution which the new movement required. It immediately became an integral part of the economy of Methodism. Wherever the Revival spread, the class-meeting took firm root and began its beneficent work. The Society at Bristol accepted it as a complete solution of the difficulties which had hindered its progress. The Society in London, hearing through Wesley of the nature of the institution, welcomed it with open arms. The officials of the Society of Newcastle-on-Tyne were easily persuaded to adopt it, and even beyond the Tweed it succeeded in winning its widening way.

In many cases the class-meeting was formed from within the Society. As at Bristol and London the exigencies of the Society led to the decisive step being taken. But elsewhere the class-meeting acted as

the nucleus of the Society. Those who had profited by the Revival made up for the lack of a society in their town or village by uniting together in a class. From this unpretentious beginning the work developed, with the result that a society was soon established. The missionary work of the class-meeting is by no means the least benefit it has conferred. 'A small class has been the nucleus of almost every church which Methodism has formed.'[1]

By common consent the ministry of the class-meeting has been most effective. It has operated at the very heart of Methodism and made itself felt in almost every detail of its life. It may safely be said that it has far surpassed the highest expectations of Wesley. He saw a light which he thought would help to guide travellers in the way to Glory, but the light has increased in strength and brilliancy until it has become not only an indicator of a future inheritance but also a source of immediate happiness and power. Even those who argue against the class-meeting as a test of membership are agreed about its helpfulness. They gladly join their testimony with others, so that at this shrine a united people offer a sincere and grateful tribute.

Wesley's estimate of the class-meeting is apparent.

[1] Stevens' *Methodism*, ii., p. 339.

As soon as it was well established and he had the opportunity to test its worth, he was more than satisfied with it. He found that in practice it really fulfilled the purposes for which it had been called into being. He therefore encouraged its adoption in every society. He insisted that those who desired to be counted as members must be enrolled in the class-list, and meet weekly with the others to receive the counsels and admonitions of the appointed leader. He visited the classes in the various towns where he preached, and spent considerable time in examining each member. Evidently he regarded the class as the measure of the society's life and usefulness. Wesley had behind him several years' experience of the value of this institution when he wrote his *Plain Account of the People called Methodists* to the Rev. Mr. Perronet, Vicar of Shoreham, Kent, and upon the strength of that experience he bore that striking tribute, to which reference has already been made.[1] There is abundant evidence that he was of the same mind to the end of his eventful career. In the judgement of this far-seeing man of God the class-meeting was indeed as a pleasant arbour by the way, wherein the weary found rest and the heart-broken were healed and the disconsolate were

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 254.

comforted and the joyous bathed in the full glory of redeeming love.

But the testimony of others, who have lived since Wesley's day and been foremost in the good fight, is equally fervent. They have no manner of doubt of the splendid ministry which the class-meeting has performed. Find a sincere Methodist, and there you have one whose admiration for the class-meeting is deep and strong. Ministers vie with leaders in their expressions of esteem, while the rank and file of Methodism roll back a great and glad Amen! 'The class-meeting has, more than any other means, preserved the original purity and vigour of Methodism. It is the best school of experimental divinity the world has seen in modern times. It has given a sociality of spirit and a disciplinary training to Methodism which are surpassed in no other religious communion.'[1] The Rev. W. L. Watkinson recently remarked at a Wesleyan Methodist Conference held in London, 'The class-meeting could say to Methodism what Paul said to Philemon, "Thou owest me thine own self."' An American professor who was on a visit to England and who attended, with his host, a Methodist class-meeting led by a man of humble circumstances, is said to have observed

[1] Stevens' *Methodism*, ii., p. 338.

afterwards: 'I do not wonder that the Methodists are deeply experienced in the things of God, if they are disciplined after this fashion.'

(1) The class-meeting has repeatedly conserved the results of an aggressive evangelism. Methodism has always stood for a simple, direct, earnest appeal, for complete surrender to the paramount claims of Jesus Christ. But when sinful men have responded to this appeal, there has immediately arisen the pressing duty of keeping them loyal to their newly plighted troth, and of establishing them in the faith once delivered to the saints. Here the class-meeting has been invaluable. Class-leaders have gained a lasting and honourable distinction by reason of their splendid diligence. They have urged converts to join the class; they have watched over their spiritual interests with an apostolic tenderness; and they have saved many a one from falling back into the distressing bondage of sin.

Wesley observed that this part of his original design was accomplished in his own time. In some districts his converts were gathered from the coarsest and most illiterate sections of the community; but Wesley put them under the care of a competent leader, and urged them regularly to attend the class-meeting, with the result that diamonds were often

and unexpectedly found. Men whose case was supposed to be hopeless became established in the faith, and soon showed forth the fruits of holy service.

And this has been the abiding glory of the class-meeting. It has placed a wall round the weak and the doubting; and while this has served the purpose of defence against subtle and determined foes without, it has also provided the needed shelter within for growth, where the graces of the higher life have gained strength and blossomed with rare beauty. 'The fruits of an itinerant ministry must have disappeared in many, perhaps most places, during the long intervals which elapsed between the visits of the earlier preachers, had they not been preserved by the class-meeting.'[1]

(2) The class-meeting has provided a means for spiritual culture. In a suggestive pamphlet,[2] written by the Rev. William Bradfield, B.A., the idea is emphasized that the class is distinctly the Church within the Church. And 'the class-meeting is the meeting of the Church.' It is a striking idea and quite true to fact. In the class-meeting is gathered the Church proper. The members of this Church know God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. And they exchange views and relate experiences and 'help to

[1] Stevens' *Methodism*, ii., p. 338. [2] *Church Membership.*

build each other up.' By means of the fervent exercises of the class-meeting the best that is in a man is awakened and cherished and made strong. Many have gone to the class-meeting with heavy hearts and clouded minds. Life's pressure has driven out almost all their courage. But this *sanctum* of the soul has proved effective. Despair has fled before the strains of mutual thanksgiving; darkness has dissolved like mist before the sun, as light has streamed from the presence of God.

> More sweet than odours caught by him who sails
> Near spicy shores of Araby the blest—
> A thousand times more exquisitely sweet
> The freight of holy feeling which we meet,
> In thoughtful moments, wafted by the gales
> From fields where good men walk,
> Or bowers wherein they rest.[1]

This particular feature of the ministry of the class-meeting does not allow of any doubt. It was argued by the early followers of Wesley, and it is the one benefit about which the Methodists of to-day are unanimous. The class-meeting has always exerted a profound influence over the religious life of those who have attended it. Dr. Dixon says: 'Our union is more complete than that of any community of Christians; and the true doctrine of the New Testa-

[1] Wordsworth.

ment has, we believe, been embodied in our practice. Once in a week, or oftener, it is expected that every Methodist will meet with others, his brethren in the Lord, for the purpose of enjoying the communion of saints. This is not formal. The joys and sorrows of the heart are laid open ; the dealings and the ways of God are made known ; the progress of the Spirit's work in the soul is unfolded ; the temptations and exercises of the life of faith are detailed ; the divine affections are quickened and refined by the exercises of praise and worship ; and the whole is sanctified by fervent and united prayer.'

(3) The class-meeting has played a great part in producing that brotherly feeling which is so evident among Methodists. Wesley was very anxious that such a feeling should be cherished. He feared for the future development of the work if the evil of *caste* was allowed to obtain a footing among his people. And he had an invaluable helper in his brother, Charles Wesley, whose sublime hymns on Christian fellowship are the joy of the whole Church on earth. What could better inspire esteem for the brethren than these lines :

> **Still let us own our common Lord,**
> **And bear Thine easy yoke,**
> **A band of love, a threefold cord,**
> **Which never can be broke.**

Make us into one spirit drink,
Baptize into Thy name;
And let us always kindly think,
And sweetly speak the same.

Sometimes the brotherliness of Methodists is spoken of as clannishness, and, for that reason, is condemned. But such a representation is a mistake: it is even an injustice. Methodists love all who adore the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, but they naturally feel a peculiar affection for those who belong to their own communion, who attend their services, and who meet in the same class. 'This brotherhood has most blessed results. Quite unconsciously it tends to create a holy watchfulness over each other's welfare. The lonely find safe and helpful companionships, and the timid receive encouragement. To the weary and worn the Church becomes a veritable home of rest, and to the exposed an ark of refuge. The spiritual convalescent is helped by those who are "strong in the Lord and in the power of His might." And when a crisis arises and a member is in spiritual difficulties, or under a cloud of temptation, harassed by doubts, or fighting life's battle with all the odds against him, "suffering wrongfully" for "conscience towards God," or plunged into sudden gloom by affliction in the home, his brethren know of it, and rally to his help.'[1]

[1] Christien's *Debt to the Class-Meeting*, p. 12.

There can be no doubt that the class-meeting, more than anything else, has fostered this feeling. As members have associated together week by week, they have come to know and to respect each other. Social differences have been forgotten. Squire has sat near to his labourer, teacher to his scholar, mistress to her maid, and each has told out of a full heart what the Lord has done for his soul. All the members of the class have been drawn into closer confidences and made to feel that they are one in Christ.

(4) The class-meeting has been the place where the best workers in the Church have invariably been discovered. One of the most charming chapters of that altogether charming book, *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush,* is that in which the author tells his readers of Domsie Jamieson's skill in tracking down *a lad o' pairts.* As soon as Domsie met with a likely lad in his Drumtochty school, he watched him with eagle eye, and as the promise of the lad developed, he redoubled his zeal in caring for his due preparation. The Domsie's ambition with every *lad o' pairts* was to give him a chance at the University of his native heath, and to show his strength with the most skilled competitors of the land. It was the abiding joy of the old Domsie, and sufficient recompense for arduous abours and unrevealed self-sacrifice, to know that

he had done something to start more than one Drumtochty lad on a distinguished and honourable career.

And, be it said to their credit, many class-leaders have always shown something of the same zeal in searching for workers for the great vineyard of God. And when they have met with any likely cases, they have spared no pains to fit them for the wider service. In the class-meeting these promising candidates have had their spiritual interests carefully watched over. Their gifts of utterance have also been exercised and developed. It has been a short walk, and pleasant withal, from the class-meeting to the pulpit or the forum. There are many cases where the class-meeting has done its own work. Without any suggestion from the leader, gifted workers have been deeply affected and moved to offer themselves to the ministry of the Church. Some of the most successful preachers of Methodism felt the first impulse to service in the class-meeting. The Rev. W. L. Watkinson, ex-President of the Wesleyan Conference, testifies: 'He went about the country preaching discourses that people thought were his . . . But, in the main, he owed them to the class-meeting.' A host of teachers and leaders look back to the same institution as the place where they passed through

the divided sacrifice which Abraham first observed, and entered into covenant with God. 'The class-meeting has been in numberless cases the training-ground for spiritual work. If a young man has possessed gifts they have soon been discovered, and in the class-room he has learned to use them. There he has begun to pray aloud, and to speak on spiritual things. There he has learned the workings of the human heart. His Bible has become an illumined volume read in the light of experience. He has seen the power of God's grace exemplified in many phases of human character. All unconsciously to himself the class-meeting has been preparing him for the work that God has had for him to do.'[1]

(5) And the class-meeting has been instrumental in establishing a system of sound finance. Captain Foy's suggestion in 1742 seemed very innocent. The idea was only to meet a temporary requirement. But, in reality, it proved to be the first plank in a system of finance which has become the wonder and the admiration of the world. The penny per week put the possibility of rendering financial help within the reach of all but the poorest of the members. Moreover, it accustomed them to the duty of sha ring in the financial responsibilities of the work of the

[1] Christien's *Debt to the Class-Meeting*, p. 14.

Church. And, perhaps best of all, it fostered from the beginning the idea of systematic support. Methodism gives the best example to-day of this kind of support. And it is undoubtedly due to the weekly payment of class-money. Stevens says: 'The whole *fiscal system* of Methodism arose from the Bristol penny collections, modified at last into the "rule" of "a penny a week and a shilling a quarter." Thus, without foreseeing the great independent cause he was about to establish, Wesley formed, through a slight circumstance, a simple and yet most effective system of finance for the expenses which its future prosecution would involve. And admirably was the pecuniary system adapted to the circumstances of that cause. He was destined to raise up a great religious organization; it was to be composed chiefly of the poor, and yet to require large pecuniary resources. How were these resources to be acquired among a poor people? The providential formation of a plan of finance which suited the poverty of the poorest, and which worldly sagacity would have contemned, banished all difficulty; and has led to pecuniary results which have rarely, if ever, been equalled by any voluntary religious organization.'[1]

These are *only a few of the advantages* which the class-

[1] *Methodism*, ii., p. 339.

meeting has evidently conferred on Methodism. But they are sufficient to show that its ministry has been very real and that Methodists have been placed under a great obligation. A few years after the establishment of the class-meeting, Wesley wrote about it in glowing terms to his friend, the Vicar of Shoreham. It is quite certain that if he could now view the inestimable blessings it has rained upon millions of devout followers, for a period of more than a century, his gratitude would be overwhelming, and his love for the institution beyond the power of words to tell.

> The meeting-spots; the chosen sacred hours;
> The loving words, that uttered all the soul;
> The faces beaming with unearthly love:
> Sorrow with sorrow sighing, hope with hope
> Exulting, heart embracing heart entire,
> As birds of social feather, helping each
> His fellow's flight, they soared into the skies,
> And cast the clouds beneath their feet, and earth,
> With all her tardy leaden-footed cares,
> And talked the speech, and ate the food of heaven.
>
> POLLOK.

OF ITS DECLINATION

THE class-meeting no longer enjoys the undivided confidence of Methodism. This may be a very unwelcome confession, but truth compels the careful observer to make it. The class-meeting has ceased to occupy that supreme place in the Methodist economy to which Wesley raised it. In many parts it is not regarded as essential. Its fellowship is neglected. Its usefulness is challenged. Its present adaptability is denied. Even where the decline is not so acute, the meeting itself has lost power. There remains little of the old fervency that set men's hearts aglow. The devotions are formal, the testimonies are unreal, *the leading* is stale and irksome, and even the prayers seem to lack in efficacy.

All branches of Methodism admit the fact of this decline. The parent body is aware of it within its own borders, while each of the children is more or less troubled in consequence of the same experience.

In Britain, both Conferences and Conventions deplore the present state of the class-meeting. There is no attempt to conceal that it is very serious. Indeed, such a policy would be foolish in the extreme. And across the seas, wherever the flag of Methodism has been unfurled, the same controversy engages the best minds of the Church. The Canadian Methodists especially seem awake to the importance of the issues at stake. Some of their leading divines have called attention to the matter, and asked for its prayerful consideration by their people. The one question discussed, whether at home or across the seas, is not, *Has* the class-meeting declined? That evidently is only too apparent. But, *Why* has it declined?

Of course, there are reasons. Every effect has its cause. Those who have devoted time to the problem find that the reasons are not far to seek. They do not say that all of them apply in every case. Localities differ. What influences one does not even touch another. But they do assert that, as a rule, one or more of the reasons indicated may be given as the explanation of the decline.

(1) An impoverished Christian experience. This is always adverse to the prosperity of the class-meeting. The latter succeeds best when Christian life is full and vigorous. It is then that members

desire to meet together in fellowship, that they long to make known how God has blessed them, that they enjoy with unspeakable satisfaction the song of praise and the sincere testimony of those who are in the Way. It is then that they are concerned about any failings of which they are conscious, and of any doubts and fears about which they solicit advice. During those periods when Methodism has been in possession of a full and aggressive life, the class-meeting has been well sustained and highly prized. Revivals of religion have invariably given impetus to its observance and brought large acquisitions to its membership. On the contrary, loss of pure and undefiled religion has always told upon this institution. Members have no great liking for a means of grace where personal testimony is the chief exercise, when they have no joy of which they can tell, and no growth for which they can be grateful, and no religious concern about which they can consult with sympathetic brethren. An indifferent professor, or a member who has allowed his religion to be overwhelmed by business or pastime, shuns the class-meeting as a guilty man does the light. He cannot bear to think of the duty of speaking about his Christian experience. He is out of touch with the spirit of fellowship. He even takes a strong dislike to this mode of service.

Once he found it to be exceedingly helpful, but now it irritates and offends him. But the fault is not in the meeting. That is much the same. It is in the changed condition of the man. It is due to an impoverished religious life. 'The simple matter of fact is, the class-meeting flourishes when religion flourishes in the hearts of our people. It declines when devotion declines. As a rule, when love of God in the hearts of one of our members begins to "wax cold," the first of the means of grace to be neglected is the class. When a backslider is restored to the joys of salvation that he had lost he at once rejoins. And when the breath of revival sweeps over any of our societies, whether in village or city, the classes at once become crowded.'[1]

It is a serious charge to level against the Church life of to-day, but there is proof enough that this life is not so full and vigorous as it ought to be. Voices are raised on all sides deploring the spiritual condition of many of the churches. The effects of an insidious materialism are only too apparent. The spirit of the age has fallen like a blight upon some of the best religious organizations. And Methodism has suffered with the rest. Even within her borders the old lines of demarcation are not so clearly defined.

[1] Christien's *Debt to the Class-Meeting*, p. 23.

There is a disposition, only too ready, to enter into a compromise that subsequent events prove to be most inconvenient. And the result is that the more spiritual gatherings of the Church suffer. The class-meeting, especially, has lost its charm and fails to command the old allegiance and joyous exercise of the members.

During recent discussions, this condition is given again and again as one of the primary reasons for the decline of Wesley's institution. And, singularly enough, it figures very prominently among the reasons mentioned by leaders of the Methodist Church of the Western Hemisphere. 'I incline to the opinion that attendance at the class-meeting is not as general as it used to be, because of the growing worldliness, and a consequent decline of the spiritual life.'[1] 'Without doubt, of late years, the decline in spirituality has affected our class-meetings more or less injuriously.'[2]

(2) Lack in home piety. There are two particulars in which this lack shows itself, and where its baneful influence especially concerns the class-meeting. Whereas in times gone by Christian parents concentrated their best influence upon the family circle, to-day they seem inclined to regard their

[1] Dr. Sutherland, of Toronto. [2] Anon.

children's religious well-being as the peculiar charge of the Church. The centre of gravity is placed without, instead of within, the home. In particular, the Sunday-school is made to do duty for the home. Parents excuse themselves by saying that they have no time to train their children, that they contribute to the Sunday-school funds, and trust to the teachers to see that the needful work is done. Mant draws a beautiful picture :

> Fair is the sight, by Israel's psalmist sung,
> Of those whom God hath in one household join'd,
> In peace, and unity, and love combined;
> Most fair, when all assemble, old and young,
> Parents and children; those who serve, among
> Those whom they serve; with social feelings kind
> Each to the other, and with knees inclined
> In patriarchal worship, heart and tongue.

But the picture indicates more of the past than of the present. Ministers of all denominations deplore this lack very greatly. They feel that such a weakness in the home circle must be the beginning of great and widespread calamity. And well they may, for the signs of the times are not propitious. Large hosts of the youth of the present generation are out of sympathy with religion. Young men and maidens prefer to walk the streets on Sunday evening, or amuse themselves with questionable pastimes, than attend the sanctuary and join in the worship of the Most High.

Certain it is that the condition of many professedly Christian homes has done something to cripple the class-meeting. A pious home is the handmaid of the Church. A family altar leads to a family pew. Conversation upon religious topics at home disposes sons and daughters to look with favour upon the fellowship of the Church, and to take the first opportunity to join it. But the lack of these things has the opposite effect. Youth develops into manhood without any sympathy with the inner aspects of Church life. Young men are inclined to regard Christian testimony as little else than sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. They despise the class-meeting and laugh at those who find it to be a means of grace. All of which means that as a result of a careless home life, the rising generation are entering upon the great conflicts of the age without any love for the ancient institution of Methodism.

Moreover, no encouragement is given to these young men and maidens to support the class-meeting. Their parents have only a very poor religious experience themselves, and, that being the case, they have no great concern about it. What an enchanting story the family pew could tell! The large square pew in the corner of the chapel, where father and mother sat with solemn countenance, and sons and daughters

gathered with youthful delight, is one of the surviving glories of a past generation. In those days it was the pride of parents to lead all their children to the house of God, and see them safely installed in their places in the family pew. And when father and mother and boys and girls sang to the tune 'Old Hundredth'—

> All people that on earth do dwell,
> Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,

it was a sight never to be forgotten. The blessed family pew! But the same thing often happened with the class-meeting. Parents loved its fellowship and found it to be of priceless worth to their religious life; and so they were anxious to introduce their children to the same blessing, and associate them with the same means of grace. Parents took their sons and daughters to the class-meeting, and encouraged them, by precept and example, to tell out what was in their heart. But it is not so now. Parents rather excuse their young people. They say it is not to be expected that they should attend this meeting. Young men do not like to be questioned about their religious experience, they have no desire to give their testimony. It is even better that they should not do so. Their place is at the feet of the teacher, where they can enlarge their knowledge of the truth. Is it surprising,

therefore, that a generation has arisen, upon whom the claims of the class-meeting fall without any appeal? The home circle is responsible for much of the decline that is so apparent.

(3) A decadent type of Church membership. The doors leading into Church membership have been thrown wide open. This is true even of some branches of Methodism. The old conditions have been relaxed, and room has been found for all comers. It is sufficient now that a person does no wrong. So long as he can show a record of moral rectitude, he is declared to be fit to join the household of faith. There is no particular inquiry as to the faith that is in him. He is not asked if he believes in the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the present ministry of the Holy Ghost. He is not called upon to show the fruits of holiness. He is honest and frank. He enjoys social prestige. He can render welcome help to the agencies of the Society. He has the gift of speech and the grace of magnanimity. And that is enough. He is accepted as a member of the Church.

But the results of this broader basis of membership are not altogether satisfactory. The quality of membership has suffered. Instead of the societies being made up of a number of people who are sure that God in Christ has pardoned their sins and adopted

them into the family of the sanctified, and who therefore are full of zeal for all that appertains to Christian fellowship and service, there is a most inconvenient conglomeration. Many, while members, have no personal experience of sins forgiven. They are moral, but do not understand faith. And these defeat the good intentions of the rest. They do not like testimony meetings. They speak against them with some amount of scorn, and infer that they are nothing more than golden opportunities to play the hypocrite.

Here plainly is a weakening force. Here is an explanation of much of the indifference that has befallen the class-meeting. This decadent type of membership acts like a miasma. Its influence is all against the prosperity of those organizations which for years have been the glory of Methodism. The Rev.W. Bradfield, B.A., in the pamphlet to which reference has been made, has these suggestive words: 'For men who are really living lives of disobedience to Christ, and neglect of His grace, to be counted as Church members is as grave a wrong to themselves as it is to the Church. Their presence clogs and hampers the activities of the Church at every turn, and they are themselves deluded into a false peace and a fatal security, which is of all spiritual states

the deadliest.' From Canadian Methodism comes this testimony: 'There is another cause more widely prevalent (than growing worldliness), namely, the coming into the Church of vast numbers of people who have no spiritual life at all; who have never been truly converted, who, as John Bunyan has it, did not come in by the gate, but tumbled over the wall. Naturally, such people have little relish for a service which consists, for the most part, or should consist, of earnest heart-to-heart talks about the work of grace in the soul; and so it has come about that the number who meet in class, compared with the whole membership of the Church, is not so large as it was.'

(4) Wearisome repetitions in personal testimonies. This has always been one of the worst snares of helpful fellowship in the class-meeting. Members find it so easy to fall into stereotyped forms of expression or go over a few well-worn, hackneyed phrases that have done faithful service to a long line of sires and sons. Southwell says:

> The lopped tree in time may grow again;
> Most naked plants renew both fruit and flower;
> The sorriest wight may find release of pain,
> The driest soil suck in some moistening shower;
> Times go by turns, and chances change by course,
> From foul to fair, from better hap to worse.

That is to say, everything undergoes change. Nothing continues in exactly the same condition for long together. Nothing—save the personal testimonies of the class-meeting ; and they seem perennial ! The members who are most guilty of this fault do not act wilfully. They often are not aware that they are saying again what they have said scores of times before. They feel that they are expected to speak, and, almost unconsciously, they begin at the first chapter of the old, old story, and bravely persevere until ' Finis ' is reached. In some cases, this has been done to such an extent that both the leader and the other members can easily foretell what these faithful souls propose to relate.

But such continual repetitions are very wearisome. The most saintly and patient members of the Church grow restive when subjected to their trying ordeal. They cannot endure them. Meaningless repetitions kill the spirit of devotion, arouse a feeling of annoyance, and make those who are anxious to sustain the best traditions of the service wish for its conclusion. Fancy a preacher offering the same prayer and reading the same lessons and delivering the same address week after week ! People would not tolerate such inexcusable conduct. And if they had no other means of showing their disapproval,

they would certainly adopt the drastic one of forsaking the Church and leaving the preacher to nurse his own shibboleths. It is just the same with the class-meeting. Thoughtless repetition in personal testimonies tends to destroy its efficacy as a means of grace. In the past this has been the unmistakable result. Regular attendants have been bored to exasperation, and then they have ceased to go to the meeting at all, as a protest against what they have called a degradation of Christian fellowship.

The evidence of the truth of this is legion. Leaders admit that their classes have been spoiled in this way. They tell of members who, for twenty years, have testified in much the same way. They have employed a few pet phrases, a line of a hymn, an incorrect quotation of Scripture, and an elaborate doxology with such regularity that these have become the only forms in which they can express themselves. And people have tired of them and stayed away. The members themselves, who are among the absentees, do not seek to hide the truth. They say, frankly, that the reason why they no longer meet in class is because of an intolerable sameness that characterizes all the testimonies. They say that summer or winter, ease or pain, prosperity or adversity brings no change. The favourite verse is—

Ah! whither should I go,
Burdened and sick and faint;
To whom should I my trouble show
And pour out my complaint?

and they cannot endure it. A service of this kind is no means of grace to them, and they are better away. It is a pity, but the fact is there. This revolt against wearisome repetition has shorn the class-meeting of much of its best support.

(5) The severe strain of the present conditions of life. Everybody is in a hurry. It seems that everybody *must* be in a hurry if he is to keep abreast of the times. Competition has become a fine art. The prophet would scarcely venture to say in the twentieth century that 'the lame take the prey.' The race of human affairs is to the swift and the battle is to the strong. Both time and energy are monopolized. From early morning till late at night the professional man and the mechanic continue to follow their respective vocations at high pressure.

Of course this strain tells upon every department of Church work. Some of the best laymen of Methodism are constantly under the necessity of excusing themselves. They give their money. They never omit to put in an appearance on the Sabbath, but they are too exhausted to turn up at the week-night service. And this is where the class meeting has

suffered. It is only fair to say that many of the members affected are themselves greatly distressed because of their inability to attend. Some of them have an ardent love for this means of grace. They have been helped through many a difficulty, and again and again enthused with new courage, when otherwise things would have been too strong for them. But business has developed, the affairs of the office have become so engrossing and competition is so keen. They are afraid to take liberties. And so with great reluctance they surrender the class-meeting.

There are cases where the want of time cannot be pleaded as an excuse. Time is free, and these people could attend if a strenuous effort were made. But even then they take no lively interest in the meeting. They are present in body but absent in mind. A wise Puritan said: 'As the sea that the wind hath lain sore upon is yet tossed and troubled after the wind is laid and the tempest gone; even so a man's mind, lately come out of the business and cares of the world, still casteth and studieth the same things, and panteth after them, and cannot after this come straight to itself, and so meditate on and exercise in spiritual matters.'

There can be no doubt that here is one of the great barriers to present-day religious life and work.

Both professional and business men admit it. They say quite freely that it is impossible for them to do any other, so long as things continue to move at such an inordinate pace. Everything, from Sabbath to Sabbath, must give way to the claims of business. They regret it, but they say it is inevitable.

(6) Inefficient leaders. The question of leadership is vital. As leaders, so class. Wesley saw this. Hence in his appointments he exercised the greatest care. He chose only those who had gifts and graces. And even these he fortified with a list of the duties they were expected to perform. Unfortunately, Wesley's high standard of choice has not been maintained. There has been a great and serious dereliction. It would not be fair to say that, in all cases, it is due to wilfulness. Sometimes qualified leaders are not forthcoming, and the Society concerned does the best it can under the circumstances. In the absence of suitable candidates unsuitable ones are called to the position. But there are instances where the unfitness of appointments is due to the loss of ideals. Those responsible fail to remember that they are dealing with one of the most important offices of the Church, that they are choosing the under shepherds, whose duty it will be to take care of the flock, to cause them to lie down amid green

pastures, and to lead them beside the still waters. And rather than be greatly troubled, they suggest the name of the most willing person, though that person has never displayed any qualification for the post.

The only possible outcome of such appointments is ultimately the ruin of the class. No institution, however well established and however vigorous, can stand for long against the evils consequent upon mismanagement. Incompetent officials will demoralize any Church. And the class-meeting is not infallible. Where there is a leader who is not, both gifted and well prepared for the important duties that fall upon him, the class-meeting is sure to suffer. Instead of being the centre of interest and power, it becomes a kind of sepulchre. There remain only the skeletons of a past glory. The members get out of touch. They are bored by the platitudes of the man in authority. They feel that what he says by way of advice does not help them in the least. He has never stood within the portals of the Palace Beautiful. He does not even know there is such a place. Therefore he cannot lead them to it. He gives serpents for fish, and stones for bread. And they refuse any longer to attend. Daniel Quorm's notion is very true: 'Class-meetings be like awls and needles—they'll go so long as ever you can keep 'em bright;

but when they get dull they'll rust, and then it be hard work. There was my old leader that I used to meet with, he was enough to kill any class-meeting.'

It is a marvellous thing that the class-meeting has survived at all in some places. If insufficient leading could have stamped it out, it ought to have disappeared long ago. But though it still enjoys in some parts a measure of life, it is only a faint shadow of its real self. It has been shorn of its strength : it lies bleeding. This is a matter which needs to be faced with courage. The evil cannot be denied. It ought not to be condoned. If other causes have played their part in bringing the class-meeting to its present inept condition, there can be no doubt that the careless leading of unqualified leaders has, in this respect, earned an unenviable reputation.

(7) An unsympathetic officialism. It is well to remember that officials are found among the members of a Church. And when the latter are not loyal to the primary institutions of their Church, it soon happens that the official circle shows signs of the same deflection. This is exactly what has occurred in different parts of Methodism. Many of the officials are out of sympathy with the class-meeting. They do not attend its fellowship, and they fail to encourage

others to do so. They are supremely indifferent. They never omit to be present on the Sabbath. A business meeting will draw them from their fondest pastime. It is the class-meeting that has no charms for them. They pass it by on the other side.

This, of course, is a serious indictment to bring against any section of official Methodism, but it is not unfair. It can be substantiated. Therefore, it is right honestly to state it. From all directions evidence can be gathered which goes to prove that, if anything, the indictment is less severe than circumstances warrant.

But the evil of it all lies particularly in the example it sets. Sedley says:

> Example is a living law, whose sway
> Men, more than all the written laws, obey.

And this is true. Parents admit it, and teachers fashion their daily work in accordance with its suggestiveness. It is also true in matters of Church life. Members, especially the younger ones, are not likely to esteem very highly any gathering of which the officials of the Church speak with some amount of disrespect. They form their ideas of what is right by the example which their overseers set them. If these fail to appreciate the class-meeting and neglect its weekly fellowship, they are not wholly to

blame. The fault lies at the door of those who have assumed to fill responsible offices and yet do not rightly carry out the duties associated with them.

It is not claimed that these are all the reasons that can be given in explanation of the decline, both in observance and power, of the class-meeting. Undoubtedly others exist. But it is suggested that these are the most important, that they indicate the principal of those adverse forces whose attacks upon a venerable and beneficent institution of Methodism have been only too successful.

AN INQUIRY

IS IT OBSOLETE?

IS IT PLAYED OUT?

IS IT SUPPLANTED?

IS IT ESSENTIAL?

'I persuade myself that the life and faculties of man, at the best but short and limited, cannot be employed more rationally or laudably than in the search of knowledge; and especially of that sort which relates to our duty and conduces to our happiness. In these inquiries, therefore, wherever I perceive any glimmering of truth before me, I readily pursue and endeavour to trace it to its source, without any reserve or caution of pushing the discovery too far, or opening too great a glare of it to the public. I look upon the discovery of anything which is true as a valuable acquisition of society, which cannot possibly hurt or obstruct the good effect of any other truth whatsoever; for they all partake of one common essence, and necessarily coincide with each other; and, like the drops of rain which fall separately into the river, mix themselves at once with the stream, and strengthen the general current.'—MIDDLETON, 1683-1750.

IS IT OBSOLETE?

TWO men were leisurely walking through the yard of one of the great engineering works of England. The one was manager of the works, while his companion hailed from across the seas. In due course, they came to a part of the yard where a number of disused locomotives had been carelessly deposited. The visitor was particularly attracted by one of these. So far as he could tell, it was a large and powerful engine, and in fair condition. He could not understand why this one had been cast aside. Surely here was a case of the reckless waste of invested capital! The visitor drew the attention of the manager to the engine, and asked for an explanation. The latter courteously pointed out that it was one of the oldest types of locomotives they had in the yard. Years ago it did splendid service. It represented the standard to which engineering skill had then advanced. But now it was of no manner

of use. It was out-of-date. It was obsolete. Something more in keeping with present knowledge and the need of the times had taken its place. It remained in the yard as a relic of a by-gone age.

And is not this exactly how the class-meeting is spoken of? Put it in the place of the discarded engine, and the observations of the manager express almost perfectly the views that are entertained by many. Is the question raised, Why do some Methodists push aside the class-meeting and seem so anxious to replace it with another institution? The answer invariably given is, Because the class-meeting is out-of-date. It is obsolete. Years ago it was very useful. When Wesley first arranged it at Bristol and elsewhere, there was a great and pressing need for its ministry; and for a long while afterwards it rendered magnificent service in the conservation and development of Methodism. But the times are changed. The class-meeting has no further call. Its machinery is not adaptable to present requirements. Something else must be evolved which, while it perpetuates the best of what has been, will appeal to the spiritual idiosyncrasies of the twentieth century.

Such views are urged from all sides. In England, ministers and laymen unite upon the platform of this

advocacy. Methodist literature is the battle-ground between the old and the new. Articles are frequently published, evidently with some measure of editorial approval, that cry out the old, while they proclaim the new. In some circles, private conversation is almost monopolized by the controversy, and the advocates of the *modern school* argue their case with exemplary skill and determination. Beyond the confines of British Methodism the same views are expressed. In the Methodism of North America there are many who look upon the class-meeting as being out-of-date, while in that of South America, the acceptance of this theory has been followed by its natural sequence, i.e. the almost entire extinction of the institution.

The idea of the obsoleteness of the class-meeting is argued from various standpoints. Each has its advocates, and these, of course, believe that the evidence they can bring in support of their own case is quite sufficient to obtain a unanimous verdict of proven.

(1) For instance, it is said that the conditions of life in the twentieth century are such that the class-meeting has no adaptability to them. When it was first established the majority of people were very ignorant and irreligious. Elementary education was

not known. The magnates of England looked upon it as a possibility fraught with the greatest peril. Social injustice flourishes only in an environment of licence and ignorance. And social injustice had come to be regarded as the providential lot of the poor. The chief distinction of religion was its lack of the Christian principle and grace. Men and women were like pagans. Wesley mourned over the benighted condition of his countrymen.

Converts gathered from such a state of degradation were just those to profit by the ministry of the class-meeting. They could not read the Bible for themselves, and their notions of right and wrong were exceedingly confused. Therefore, the personal treatment of the leader, his method of soliciting a statement of the religious experience of the members, his exposition of Scripture, coupled with his counsel and admonition, were exactly what was needed. Moreover, as these members, gathered from the poorer and neglected classes of the community, sat side by side with those who had the rule over them, they had an object-lesson of the brotherhood of the Christian family of the most impressive kind. They could not have understood the mere theory. They certainly would not have believed it. But in the class-meeting they had –

an exhibition of it. Therefore, they could no longer doubt.

But the social and religious conditions of the people have undergone a great change. While many evils still remain to be redressed, there is a vast difference between the opening years of the twentieth century and the corresponding period of the nineteenth. Elementary education has made great strides. Nearly every youth can read and write. His mind has been developed. He knows how to think, and he *does* think. Many of the old social injustices have been removed. Education and social improvement have brought a welcome spirit of self-reliance. Men feel the splendour of human life. They are conscious of the divinity within them. They realize, as never before, the magnitude of their gifts. Religion, instead of being a cold formality, is as a rock of refuge. Rather, it is a sanctified and aggressive force that cheers the heart and refines the conscience, and strengthens the will and leads on and on—to God.

Now, the argument is that, therefore, the ministry of the class-meeting is no longer necessary. People can manage for themselves. They are intelligent and well educated. They can read the Bible for themselves. They can have fellowship in the ordinary worship of the Church. And they can believe in the

union of Christian hearts and see their duty in the way of financial support of the work, without any aid from this old-time institution. People are beyond the class-meeting just as those who live under the Christian dispensation have out-grown the childish types and shadows of the Mosaic ritual.

It must, of course, be conceded that there is a great improvement in the conditions under which the people of England live. Wages are better. Education is free and universal. Homes are much less like kennels. Pastimes are healthy and varied. It is also true that the average person is fairly well qualified to attend to the culture of his own religious well-being. But it does not follow that those means of grace which an earlier generation found to be so helpful, are now altogether useless. If this were so, many of our most cherished institutions would stand condemned. The essence of the ministry of the class-meeting is spiritual fellowship. All the other purposes and benefits associated with it converge to this. Its fundamental object is to render mutual help in the great and life-long task, of 'growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.' Dr. Rigg says, 'Fellowship — mutual, active, spontaneous, equal fellowship—was the beginning of Christianity, its earliest law and life. This is the formative idea

of Methodism, as it was of the primitive Church. Its whole organization is developed from this idea—leaders and stewards, lay preachers, separated ministers, each with their due vocation, all grow out of this common fellowship and life.'[1]

But spiritual fellowship is an abiding need of the race. Nothing removes it—neither education nor social emancipation nor religious insight. Indeed, these advantages increase its intensity. The people who attain the loftiest heights in these respective spheres feel most acutely the great and pressing need of familiar conversation on holy things. It was a king, pious and well informed, who sighed: 'As the hart panteth after the water-brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? . . . When I remember these things I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holy-day.'

For this reason then, among others, the argument seems fallacious. However much conditions of life are changed, the need for spiritual fellowship remains, and is deeply felt. And so long as this is the case, the

[1] *Class-Meeting Fellowship*, p. 34.

class-meeting, as one of the best means for spiritual fellowship, is not obsolete, not a relic of the past, but a very timely and effective service. 'What about the notion that the class-meeting is behind the times and unsuited to the needs of cultured people? Wherein do the religious needs of such people differ from those of the uncultured? In no respect whatever. Sin is the same thing in the prince as in the peasant; the method of reconciliation to God, and the process of spiritual regeneration, are the same for the scholar as for the unlettered workman; the means of spiritual culture are alike for both, and if the man of scholarship has advantages which the uncultured man does not possess, there is all the more reason why they should meet together in just such surroundings as the class-meeting affords, so that the man of learning and experience may communicate of his fullness to his less-favoured class-mates.'[1]

(2) But it is again said that people of the present generation are strongly averse to the catechistical method of dealing with religious testimony. It is not suited to their temperament. They resent it, and refuse to attend those services in which it occupies a prominent place. The argument runs: 'Religion is a secret principle of the soul. It shrinks back from

[1] Dr. Sutherland, of Toronto.

the public gaze, and seeks concealment, and should not seek publicity.'

It is quite true that many people are very reserved on matters of personal religion. They will talk about the weather, or the latest news on the Exchange or the prospects of the party at some by-election, with untiring zeal; but the moment questions of religious experience and practice are raised, they seem strangely to lose all powers of utterance. Indeed, they resent what they are pleased to call an unwarrantable liberty. Two men, immersed in business, sat in a London office. One of them was a sincere but diffident Christian. He had often felt condemned that he had not spoken to his friend on matters of the soul. They frequently met in that office, and yet never once had he avowed himself. He determined that the next opportunity of doing so should not be allowed carelessly to pass. So, on this particular afternoon, when the business was completed, he nervously asked his friend, 'Are you a Christian?' The latter looked amazed and showed considerable annoyance. He abruptly broke off the conversation, took his hat, and left the office. Afterwards he explained to another acquaintance that he had been grossly insulted, that So-and-So had the temerity to ask if he was a Christian.

This disposition to resent close inquiry upon matters of personal religion is not at all creditable to those concerned, and it is just as well that they should know it. Such a disposition often indicates the presence of one of two serious faults. Either these people are suffering from a phase of religious pride. They do not like to be confronted in such a precise way. It makes them feel foolish. The eyes of fashionable friends are turned upon them and a supercilious smile is raised at their expense. They cannot endure it. They will not put themselves in the way of it. And this is pride, the worst form of pride, because it makes a shuttlecock of religion. Hood says in his own inimitable way :

> Shun pride, O Rae!—whatever sort beside
> You take in lieu, shun spiritual pride!
> A pride there is of rank, a pride of birth,
> A pride of learning, and a pride of purse,
> A London pride—in short, there be on earth
> A host of prides, some better and some worse;
> But of all prides, since Lucifer's attaint,
> The proudest swells a self-elected saint.

Or they are in the throes of spiritual bankruptcy. They resent the catechistical method because it draws out from them a confession of their dire religious state. They fulfil the requirements of ordinary church-goers. They attend the services, their names are on the roll of membership ; they pay their tithes,

deal justly with all men, and never misrepresent themselves by going to extremes. But that is all. They have no deep religious experience. They do not enjoy the peace that passeth all understanding. Their religion is purely a formal matter. And this being the case, they do not like to be questioned too closely about it. Interrogation acts like a searchlight. It shows up the weak spots and reveals the barrenness of a superficial life.

It is very certain that the catechetic method cannot be given up because a cry is raised against it by those whose religious experience is in eclipse. It has proved too valuable an adjunct to the cultivation of the highest life to be lightly set aside. It is well known that in scholastic circles, it is looked upon as one of the most effective ways of imparting and then developing knowledge. It is the Socratic method, and is vindicated by results. And certainly it has a place in the culture of the soul. The Lord Jesus Christ recognized this. He carefully followed the method in His work with the twelve disciples. He questioned them on both their personal experience and details of their experimental ministry. There is proof of this in what occurred in the Upper Room. And upon the replies He received and the information He gathered, He based counsels and exhortations

which have been of inestimable service to all succeeding generations. Wesley observed the usefulness of the method in early Church times, and he found that his own experience corroborated the testimony of history. He declared that by this personal treatment the timid were emboldened and the weak grew strong, and the tempted were encouraged to endure as good soldiers of the Cross. The most cursory glance at Methodist history will convince any impartial mind that here is one of the features of the class-meeting which has given its chief distinction to it, and explains its widespread usefulness.

The method is not inappropriate to present-day religious experiences. Where it is followed with discretion, it is capable of doing much good and of rendering valuable help to those who are earnest to make their calling and election sure. The purpose is not to pry into the private concerns of a member or to extort a confession of sin. Then it would become harmful, and border on the evils of the confessional. Its one aim is to encourage members to tell of the goodness of God, to state their religious difficulties, to give an opportunity to vent those feelings which all, at times, desire to pour into the ears of another, and to enable the leader to counsel and encourage as circumstances require. The biographer of the late

Rev. H. P. Hughes, M.A., says: 'With regard to the practice of confession, he (Mr. Hughes) often said, that undoubtedly experience proved that there was a great longing in the human heart at times to pour out confession of sin, weakness, and spiritual need to some trusted and experienced spiritual adviser; but to make such a practice compulsory, and to limit it to a priesthood, who had arrogated to themselves the powers of absolution which were Christ's alone, was absolutely unscriptural, and had led to centuries of abuse. Yet this legitimate human need was a fact, and when facts were brought before his notice he did not ignore them. London, in particular, had shown him the need of "spiritual directors," and in Methodism, he believed, the need was met by the really efficient, discreet, well-instructed class-leader.'[1]

Moreover, it is a fact that the best and most vigorous Christian does not resent being questioned about his experience. Indeed, he is only too glad to make known the great good with which God has blessed him, and to seek guidance and help in time of need. It will be admitted by any one who has taken the trouble to observe the various characteristics of Christian people, that the most heavenly-minded, those who walk in the light as He is in the light,

[1] *Life of H. P. Hughes, M.A.*, p. 635.

do not decline to speak of their experience. They may naturally be very reticent. The effort to testify costs them a good deal; but the joy of witnessing for Christ is never wanting, and in spite of natural weakness and timidity, they tell out what a great Saviour they have found, and they enlarge upon the loving-kindness and tender mercy with which their days have been crowned. The song of their heart is—

> My soul's full of glory, which inspires my tongue;
> Could I meet with angels, I'd sing them a song.

The following is culled from the sayings of Henry Ward Beecher. It is delightfully suggestive as to the manner in which the diffident break through their hesitation, and become witnesses for the truth:

'I think I heard a conversation in the leaves this morning as I came to church. The buds that had lain all winter in their wrappings, as under roofs and blankets, were beginning to say to each other, "Is it not March? Is it not time for us to unfold ourselves and expand our leaves in fragrance to the air?"

'But one tiny bud answered, "I can never unfold to the sun and the air these dear little leaves that have lain so long in my bosom. I could not bear such publicity. I must keep their fragrance still." And the sun and the wind laughed; for they knew that when they should shine and blow upon the bud,

and fill up and swell those tiny leaves, it would open from the necessity of its nature, and that when they were swimming in a bath of solar light, they would give out their odour unconsciously to every breeze.

'So many a heart says, "I could not bear to have my sweet buds of feeling exposed, through profession of Christianity, to the gaze of the world. I will keep them safely hid in my bosom, and be a Christian in secret." But when the winds of heaven blow upon them, and the sun of God's love shines, they will become vocal, and must needs give themselves expression.'

(3) It is further said, that the class-meeting, especially in its confessional aspect, is the product of the strong leanings of Wesley to High Churchism. He developed the idea of stating one's religious experience to the leader, because he had sympathy with the confessional, and believed that it was capable of doing good. The class-meeting, therefore, is a modified form of the confessional, and this being the case, the democratic and aggressive spirit of the twentieth century cannot tolerate it at all. It condemns the class-meeting as an unwelcome relic of the past.

It is very singular how one person after another

has argued the close affinity of these institutions. Even in Wesley's day there were those who took up this position. In his *Plain Account*, Wesley says: 'An objection much more boldly and frequently urged is, that these bands are mere Popery'[1] And the plea is still raised against the class-meeting. No doubt those who raise it believe that they can play upon the well-known dislike of Methodists to all forms of Popery. Methodism is one of the great bulwarks of Protestantism. Its evangelism has done much to strengthen the hold of a free, direct, spiritual worship upon the affections of the nations of the world. But the plea is out of court. There really is *no* affinity between these two historic institutions. Place them side by side, and the most cursory examination will show how foolish is the suggestion and how worthless is the argument based upon it.

In the confessional, the officiating person is a priest, and he claims to be the vicar of the Lord Jesus Christ. He claims more: 'Wherefore they (the priests) are deservedly called not only angels, but even gods, since they have among us the power and the divinity of the immortal God.'[2] But in the class-meeting the officiating person is a leader. He

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 259.

[2] Catechism of the Council of Trent.

assumes no priestly prerogatives, he subscribes to no audacious pretensions. He is only a man, a sinner saved by grace, a brother among brethren, who, because of his rich experience of divine things and his clear insight to truth and his marked ability *to lead*, is called to watch over the spiritual interests of his brethren, and to help them in the way to God. In the confessional, the priest is alone with the suppliant. In his hearing only is the confession made. But in the class-meeting the experience of each member is given before the others, including the leader. There is no secrecy. There is no need for secrecy. In the confessional, the suppliant *confesses*. And in order to help him to make a full confession, suggestions are offered and questions put of the most delicate kind. 'Full confession of mortal sins must be made to them (the priests), even those most secret things, and specially those sins committed against the two last precepts of the Decalogue (as understood by the Roman Catholic Church), which sometimes more grievously wound the mind, and are more dangerous than those things that are openly admitted.' The possible demoralizing effects of such a confessional are obvious. But in the class-meeting there is no confession, in this sense of the term. There is experience. Each

member tells of the goodness of God and the failings of his own heart, He tells of his joys and sorrows, of his realizations and ambitions. It is fellowship one with another. In the confessional, the suppliant confesses with a view to receiving absolution. The priest claims to be the only channel along which absolution comes. And he can absolve only when he knows the sins. Therefore, without confession there is no absolution. But in the class-meeting there is no thought of such a thing. Methodists believe that only God in Jesus Christ can forgive sins. The leader certainly has no power of absolution. He counsels, admonishes, exhorts, encourages, and instructs; but he does not forgive. And once more, 'by their fruits ye shall know them.' The fruits of the confessional provide the most eloquent and conclusive reasons for its condemnation. Even that indomitable leader of the Puseyite movement says: 'Be assured that this is one of the gravest faults of our day, in the administration of the sacrament of penance, that it is the road by which a number of Christians go down to hell.'[1] But the class-meeting can look upon results of the most exalted and spiritual kind. No souls have been ruined by its ministrations, but countless hosts have been

[1] Pusey's *Manual for Confessors*, p. 315.

blessed beyond measure. It has been 'as an hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest, as rivers of waters in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.'

It is not at all surprising that Wesley so curtly dismissed this objection. 'I hope I need not pass a harder censure on those (most of them at least) who affirm this, than that they talk of they know not what; they betray in themselves the most gross and shameful ignorance. Do not they yet know, that the only Popish confession is, the confession made by a simple person to a priest? Whereas, that we practise is, the confession of several persons conjointly, not to a priest, but to each other. Consequently it has no analogy at all to Popish confession. But the truth is, this is a stale objection, which many people make against anything they do not like. It is all Popery out of hand.'[1] Dr. Rigg makes the following timely remarks: 'The Roman confessional is the deadly perversion of the primitive idea of intimate Christian fellowship. Here, as elsewhere, *corruptio optimi pessima*. The terrible cunning, which seems to be one of the "familiar spirits" of the Papacy, has seized hold of a most potent instinct, and has enslaved it. The confessional is the greatest strength and the

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 259.

greatest curse of Popery. The counterpart truth to this counterfeit heresy is *mutual* Christian fellowship and confession. "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." Methodism embodies the true principle, and if the embodiment be worthy this must remain its greatest strength, its essential power.'[1]

It appears therefore that the charge of obsoleteness brought against the class-meeting cannot be sustained. As a valued institution of Methodism, it still has a part to play in fostering a higher standard of religious experience among the members; its method of personal treatment is as necessary and beneficial now as ever; and its distinctness from and superiority to the Popish confessional is such that 'he who runs may read.'

[1] *Class-Meeting Fellowship*, p. 33.

IS IT PLAYED OUT?

SOME things exist only as a means to an end. That is their *raison d'être*. When the end is reached, the things themselves cease to have any importance. Not that they are obsolete. So far as their mechanism is concerned, they may be of the latest approved pattern and only recently have left the hands of the artificer. But they have done their work, they have accomplished the design for which they were made. Therefore, they have no further use. They are played out. They are valueless.

When a building is completed, the scaffolding is no longer necessary. It is nothing to say that it represents a fine piece of workmanship, that its intricacies are such that only skilled men could put it together. The scaffolding was erected not as an end, but as a means to an end. Its wooden terraces were intended to help the workmen more expeditiously to carry

out their work on the building. And now that it is finished, the scaffolding is useless. It is worse than useless, for it prevents the passer-by seeing the full beauty of the spacious edifice. Some time ago a small party of visitors stood near to a large iron-furnace, waiting for the hour of casting Meanwhile, they were deeply interested in the preparations. They saw the casters lay out a bed of sand, in which they cut row after row of symmetrical gullies. From the furnace a larger gully was made, and this met the others at right angles. Nothing could be more striking than the deftness with which those practised hands did their work. Nothing could be more pleasing to the eye than the perfect formation of that seriated bed of sand. The party watched the glowing fluid, as it came through the aperture of the furnace, ran down the main channel and then filled up gully after gully. Next day some of them returned to the furnace and found that where order had reigned all was now confusion. The gullies had disappeared, the sand was carelessly scattered, and implements had been left about as if with wilful intent to complete the picture of desolation. Why ? The answer is clear. The casters made those rows of gullies for a specific purpose. They were not the end the workmen had in view. They were only

means. Bars of iron were the end. And when the casting was over and the molten iron consolidated and cooled, so that it could be removed to the trucks, the seriated bed had accomplished its purpose. For the present it had no further use. It was played out. Hence the casters destroyed it.

Now, is this how the case stands with the class-meeting? Is it true to say that the class-meeting is played out, that the end for which it was established has been achieved, and that therefore the means itself is no longer required? Some take up this position. They do not argue that the class-meeting is out-of-date, obsolete. They admit that, so far as its organization is concerned, it is as adaptable to the conditions of the present as to those of the past. The methods of the class-meeting are not antiquated. They are well fitted to appeal to the modern mind. There is nothing the matter with the *mechanism.* The point is that the class-meeting has fulfilled its mission. Its utility is exhausted. As an institution of the Church, it is effete. Therefore, there is no further need for it. It should be put aside, removed as the scaffolding, brushed out as the remnants of a casting.

It is quite true that this contention is not so frequently met with as that for the obsoleteness of

the class-meeting, but it can be found in much of the literature dealing with the question. Either the class-meeting has fulfilled the purpose for which it was primarily established, or it has used up all its vitality, so that it can no longer minister helpfulness to those who are ambitious to scale the heights of holiness and appear before their Sovereign Lord, 'not having spot nor wrinkle nor any such thing.' The conclusion to which both of these suggestions lead is the same, i.e. the effeteness of the class-meeting. One or other of these suggestions can be traced not only in Methodist literature, but also in discussions, sustained alike in the pulpit and on the platform. Repeatedly it is said that the institution upon which Wesley laid such store has no mission for the twentieth century. It has done its work; it has served its generation; it has used up its spiritual vigour; and it must make way for something better. But such statements call for the most searching investigation.

(1) It is said that the purpose for which the class-meeting was instituted has been accomplished. In a previous chapter it was pointed out that Wesley designed to cover several important ideas by this means. There was the *remedial.* He desired that the class-meeting should shelter new converts from

the subtle temptations by which they were surrounded, that the members themselves should be saved from the pain and weakness of internal dissension, and that all who made profession of faith should find the common platform of brotherhood in Christ. There was the *devotional.* Wesley planned that by means of the class-meeting the members of the revival movement should cultivate a deeper spiritual life. It was something for them to know 'God and Jesus Christ whom He had sent.' But it was imperative that such knowledge should be as a stepping-stone, whereby they might attain loftier heights and enjoy still more glorious revelations. Hence the class-meeting, with its provision for fellowship with the Father and with one another. And there was the *financial.* Wesley hoped that by means of the class-meeting a basis for financial support would be formed which should serve the cause of Methodism and supply it with the needed income for a rapidly growing work.

The history of Methodism is the witness that Wesley's complex design has been amply realized. Wesley himself had evidence of the remedial influence exerted by the class-meeting. It put a stop to many of the abuses with which the young community had been troubled. Moreover, the religious life of the members showed a marked improvement. They

grew from strength to strength and became firmly established in the faith. And so far as the financial aspect is concerned, the pressure which had been felt and the fear about future developments were soon removed. The class-meeting is one of the few cases where intention and experience coincide. And it is argued that therefore its day is over, its work is done. The religious experience it has fostered will ever remain as its best testimonial; but the scaffolding in which that experience has grown can safely be demolished.

But is this so? On reflection it will be found that the conditions which called the class-meeting into existence are recurrent. They are not limited to one generation only. They belong to all generations. They stand out as the abiding needs of the race. So that while it is true that these were met by the class-meeting in a previous generation, they appear again with the next generation, and will continue to do so, as long as man remains what he is. The deepest needs of personal religious life to-day are precisely the same as those which confronted Wesley. They may appear in a less extravagant form. They may be under the influence of a refinement of thought and ambition, which was lacking at the transition period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

but they are decidedly the same. Take the need of fellowship as between the followers of Jesus Christ. Methodism cannot afford to ignore this. It is more than ever a pressing necessity. Rich and poor must be brought together and made to feel the splendour of that brotherhood which is an abiding factor of the kingdom of heaven. Take also the need of protection against temptation. Who will say that there is less temptation in the world? It may not be so blatant. Age has brought cunning. But temptation is as persistent and seductive as ever. And Methodists cannot afford to break up a means of grace that has helped scores of Christians to defeat it and 'push the battle to the gate.' Take, further, the need of spiritual cultivation. This surely is as great as ever. 'None is righteous, no not one.' The majority of Christians give evidence of the truth of these words. They reveal many flaws, many discrepancies. 'God deals in spiritual proceedings, as in natural, to extremes by the mean. We are not born old men, but first an infant, then a man, then old. We are conceived of immortal seed, born of the Spirit, so go on to perfection. There is first a seed, then a plant, then a tree. We get not at one jump into heaven, nor at one stroke kill the enemy.' Hence the necessity of spiritual cultivation. The ideal is

the same—perfect in Christ Jesus. And so long as the ideal remains and the actual is so undeveloped, there will continue to be a need of that which can and does assist in attaining the ideal.

There may be great differences between the earlier years of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Undoubtedly the latter enjoys privileges which were entirely unknown to the former. But the spiritual needs of the community are the same. And, therefore, that which was called into existence to minister to the one, remains an urgent necessity for the other. The case stands thus: It is contended that the class-meeting was instituted to meet certain present conditions, that having met those conditions and fulfilled the purpose for which it was instituted, it is of no further use and can be discarded. But, in reply, it is urged that those very conditions which first made the class-meeting a necessity still exist; they are recurrent; they reappear with each succeeding generation; and this being the case, the class-meeting is an abiding necessity. It cannot be played out. Its ministry is perennial.

Dr. Sutherland[1] says: 'That the class-meeting has not yet had its day may be inferred from the fact that it meets a real want of the religious life, and that

[1] Dr. Sutherland, of Toronto.

want is not confined to one age or people, but is found wherever the religious instinct survives. Though the class-meeting, in its present form, originated in what might also be called an accident, yet its adaptation to promote spiritual life, to instruct the ignorant, to reclaim the erring, and to encourage the tried and tempted, was so quickly perceived that it was almost instantly incorporated in the Methodist societies, at the most intensely spiritual period of their history, as an invaluable means of grace. It was not solely, or perhaps even chiefly, a provision for the instruction of unlettered Christians, for many who prized it were among the most cultured men and women of their time. One of the most marked characteristics of a truly religious revival is the desire which it creates for Christian fellowship, and among all the expedients that have been tried there is not one which provides for that fellowship in a better way than does the class-meeting.'

The Rev. C. W. L. Christien observes in his pamphlet[1]: 'We must maintain it (the class-meeting) because the ends it has secured are those which the Church of Christ must, in some way, attain in every age, if it is to fulfil the Saviour's purposes. Newborn souls will always need instruction and guidance,

[1] *Our Debt to the Class-meeting*, p. 20.

the renewed heart will always long for Christian fellowship, there will ever be the same need for mutual edification, the people of God will always need to cultivate the spirit of a holy brotherhood, and if men are to do God's work their hearts must be prepared. These are the perennial needs of the Lord's chosen. So it would be folly to assume an air of superiority, and talk of the class-meeting as though, while it suited the benighted generations who lived before us, it was quite effete in the enlightened circles of the twentieth century. The wants of the human heart are the same in every age. Just as truly as the world will ever need the same gospel and the same converting power, so the Church of the future will require the same helps heavenward as did those who have finished their course and gone to be with Christ.'

(2) But, again, it is said that the class-meeting, as a means of grace, is exhausted. It has done its work. It has nourished and strengthened religious life in the past, but now it has no vitality left. It is like a worked-out coal mine. The machinery is right enough. But the mine is exhausted. Its supply is run out. There is absolutely no further use for it.

It is, unfortunately, true that in many cases the class-meeting does seem to lay itself open to this charge.

As a means of grace it fails to exert any great influence for good. People attend its services, but never feel any thrill of joy, and never know of the inrush of fresh power. The class-meeting has become a bore. Many Methodists shun it as they might a place of evil reputation. They say that they used to take part in its exercises, but these became so irksome and the whole service was so artificial that they gave it up, and have no intention of starting again.

But the fault of this condition of things is not in the class-meeting but in the disaffected people themselves. The class-meeting is what it has always been. The change lies in those who attend it. Therefore, instead of condemning it they should look nearer home and inquire if there is not a beam first to be removed out of their own eye.

It is sometimes said that prayer has lost its efficacy. However much it benefited people of earlier times, it is of very little use to-day. And so men are warned not to pray. They are told that to do so is only to waste time, and to prepare certain disappointment for themselves. Immediately the retort comes that those who argue in this way probably express accurately enough their own experience; but they have no qualification whatever for passing judgement

on prayer in general. They do not possess the spirit that is essential for successful prayer. They live outside the charmed circle. The fault, therefore, is with themselves. Prayer is efficacious enough, as many an earnest soul knows. It is to the present generation what it was in the heroic age of the patriarchs and the stirring times of the Apostles, when men saw God face to face and communed with Him, as friend with friend.

> No words can tell what sweet relief
> Here for my every want I find,
> What strength for warfare, balm for grief—
> What peace of mind!
>
> Hush'd is each doubt; gone every fear;
> My spirit seems in heaven to stay:
> And e'en the penitential tear
> Is wiped away.[1]

It is, again, said that the Bible is an effete Book. It spoke well enough to the Jewish dispensation; and the New Testament had a message for the scattered congregations of the Roman Empire, but it has no application to the needs of the present age. It seems strange that any one can sincerely believe in this theory. But if words mean anything at all, they certainly convey the impression that not a few have attached themselves to this school of thought. But here, again, the fault is not with the Bible but the

[1] Charlotte Elliott.

reader. The Bible has no meaning, because the reader is suffering from spiritual blindness. He is like the Ethiopian to whom Philip conveyed timely help. A great host of pious and well-informed people declare that the Bible, instead of being effete, is still the 'Word of the everlasting God, Will of His glorious Son.' They repeat, with glad hearts, the confession of the psalmist: 'The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward.'[1]

A little while ago there was a lively discussion in the newspapers on the question: 'Is Christianity played out?' Of course, there were *pros* and *cons*. Some were quite sure that it had exhausted itself, that it has no ministry for the problems of the day. But others were equally sure that Christianity, as a force

[1] Ps. xix. 7-11.

making for righteousness, is as vigorous and as successful as ever. But how can the existence of such conflicting views be explained ? It is, again, the question of one's own personal condition. If a man has no experience of the power and abiding blessedness of faith in Jesus Christ, he will probably argue that Christianity is played out ; but if to the witness of history he can bring the confirmation of a joyous and ever-advancing religious life, he will almost blush to entertain the doubt. Christianity is alive or dead to a man just as he knows or is ignorant of its quickening efficacy in the heart.

> Love I much ? I've much forgiven,
> I'm a miracle of grace.

And this line of argument is true in the case of the class-meeting. Everything depends upon the spiritual condition of those who attend its services. Where that condition is impoverished, men will continue to say that the class-meeting is effete. It *will* be effete to them. It can be no other. For the class-meeting, as a means of grace, is what we make it. Let a member, who is in the full experience of a healthy Christian life, bring the glow of that life into the service ; let him concentrate his very best faculties and powers upon the fellowship that is sustained ; and he will never speak of the effeteness of the class-

meeting. He will receive abounding good himself; he will find that the class-meeting is still as a pleasant arbour by the way, set for the refreshment of weary travellers, and others will know of a certainty that here is peace and joy and strength in the Holy Ghost. 'The ordinances of religion are compared to wells of water; but then they are like Jacob's well. . . . Faith is, as it were, the rope, and our souls the vessel which we let down into this well to fill them with living water. But that they do no good to some, forms no reason why we should despise or neglect ordinances. It is no fault in the bread that, thrust between a dead man's teeth, it does not nourish him. The truth is, that we must have spiritual life to get the benefit of religious ordinances. Water will revive a withering, but not a withered plant; wine will revive a dying, but not a dead man; the breath of your mouth, or the breeze of heaven, will rekindle the smouldering coal, but not the cold, grey ashes of the hearth. And it is only spiritual life that can derive benefit from such ordinances as are intended to revive the faint, and give strength to the weary.'[1]

It is of the first importance that this truth be clearly recognized. It is the explanation of much that seems to countenance the idea of the effeteness of the class-

[1] Dr. Guthrie.

meeting. The charge, instead of really damaging an honoured and effective institution, only recoils upon the accuser. It enforces the need of the exercise of introspection.

(3) And here the evidence of experience surely has the right to be heard. Happily there are many within the circle of the Methodist family who still love the class-meeting, and rarely fail to attend its services. It is one of the most precious means of grace that they know. If a choice must be made between the business-meeting and the class-meeting, the former is passed over in preference for the latter. And these faithful friends are gathered from all sections of the community. The rich and the poor are there. The learned mingle their testimony with the illiterate. Master and servant sit at the feet of the same leader, and gladly tell out what the Lord has done for them. Now, the point is this: Some, who are not friendly to the institution, say that it has done its work and is no longer required, while others aver that, at any rate, as a means of grace, it is exhausted, its strength has gone. Therefore both of these objectors agree that the class-meeting is played out. But what do those say who still enjoy the class-meeting and find it to be a real help to the cultivation of goodness? Their testimony is unanimous and definite. They

deny that the class-meeting does not meet a felt need of to-day, for it meets the deepest and most urgent needs of their spiritual life. And they equally deny that it has no longer grip and power, for they themselves experience its efficacy every time they attend. A little fact is worth volumes of fiction. And the testimony of fact which these eye-witnesses supply is sufficient to explode all objections to the present worth of the class-meeting, even if no other arguments were forthcoming. Mr. Bradfield says: 'We ought to stop here to say something which we all know to be true, and take for granted, yet often forget because it is not said, namely, that the class-meeting is alive and prospering among us still, that there is no reason for thinking it less spiritually effective than it used to be.' Dr. Rigg[1] pays a warm tribute to the work which the late Rev. H. P. Hughes, M.A., carried on at the London West End Mission. That the tribute is well deserved, all the world knows. For Mr. Hughes and his band of helpers were like a blazing torch, lighting up the thickest gloom of the great surging city. In the tribute Dr. Rigg lays emphasis upon Mr. Hughes' loyalty to the class-meeting. It is said that the latter found it to be an invaluable adjunct to the work of reclaiming the fallen. 'In this work

[1] *Class-Meeting Fellowship*, p. 14, et seq.

I need scarcely say that he relied upon Wesley's class-meeting, in its original character and spirit, as his special means of bringing souls to Christ.' The reference is important, for while those who are in the enjoyment of a religious experience find the class-meeting still to be an effective means of grace, here is clear and striking testimony that it retains its old power of helping those who are inquirers in the way to God.

But time and space would fail to tell all that a grateful people have seen and felt. It is enough to know that there are many Methodists who still love and attend the class-meeting. So far is it from being played out that to them it seems more helpful than ever. They confess that, while having fellowship—

> We all partake the joy of one,
> The common peace we feel;
> A peace to sensual minds unknown,
> A joy unspeakable.

It is not surprising that the Committee of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference, appointed to investigate the question of Church membership, asked the Conference of 1905 to declare: 'The class-meeting is a form of fellowship which the history of our Church has proved to be, when duly administered, of the highest efficiency, and of manifold and far-reaching influence. It is pre-eminently a method for sheltering,

encouraging, and developing the spiritual life. Moulded for us by the hand of Providence, hallowed and sanctioned . . . by the manifest and abundant blessing of God, it is recommended to our people as a most precious means of grace, which they are strongly urged to attend.'

IS IT SUPPLANTED?

THIS is the question around which most controversy has, perhaps, gathered. The younger section of Methodism insist that the class-meeting is not such an important factor in their economy, because other institutions have arisen more in harmony with the spirit of the age, and in every way qualified to carry on and even enhance the work of those which rendered such magnificent service in the past. They mention the Wesley Guild and the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour. They argue that these are the institutions of the future, and that therefore the class-meeting is superfluous.

Another section of Methodism is enamoured of the meetings which are held for Bible study. The success of these meetings, where they have been established, has encouraged the view that they are destined to crowd out the old form of fellowship. People evidently like them better. They have more

sympathy with Bible study than with personal testimony. The former edifies, and therefore helps in the guidance of life's affairs, while the latter fosters the spirit of self-complacency and is liable to end in giving offence. Hence Bible-classes are given preference over class-meetings, and while the one is warmly commended, the other is spoken of as being supplanted.

A third section of Methodism support the claims of the band-meeting. Recognizing the supposed difficulty of securing the attendance of many Methodists at the testimony meeting, these point out that the band-meeting has the advantage of allowing every person to do as he pleases. He can speak or pray or keep silence. And inasmuch as many class-meetings have been merged into band-meetings with encouraging success, there is clear evidence that this type of fellowship is better suited to the needs of the present age. The class-meeting is unnecessary where the band-meeting is kept vigorous.

And yet Methodists must seriously consider these respective claims before they agree to write off the class-meeting as being supplanted. Things are not always what they seem. Arguments can be used with such skill, evidence can be marshalled in such a way, that even fiction is made to look like fact, and the

false is taken for the true. The question at issue is of supreme importance, for the Methodism of John Wesley is invited to renounce one of the most essential of its institutions in favour of others, whose staying power is yet problematical. The advice given in the *Mirror for Magistrates* is apposite here :

> A *golden* treasure is the *tried* friend ;
> But who may gold from counterfeits defend ?
> Trust not too soon, nor yet too soon mistrust :
> With th' one thyself, with th' other thy friend thou hurt'st ;
> Who twines betwixt, and steers the golden mean,
> Nor rashly loveth, nor mistrusts in vain.

(1) It is claimed that the Wesley Guild and the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour have removed the need of the class-meeting, at any rate so far as the young people of Methodism are concerned.

There is no need to disparage the excellent work which these kindred institutions are doing. The case for the class-meeting is not helped by such a line of argument. It is to be feared that sometimes advocates of the class-meeting have been betrayed into inexcusable extravagance of speech when referring to them. The zeal of these devotees has played them false. But it is a great pity. No good can ever accrue from mutual condemnations. On

the other hand, feelings are injured, prejudices show their strength, the forces of the Church divide into opposite camps, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ is dishonoured. Neither the Wesley Guild nor the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour is in need of defence. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' Whether you take the one or the other, the record of its work is its best vindication. By means of its careful and diligent ministry thousands of young people have been saved for the Church. The old problem: 'How can the school retain its elder scholars?' is practically solved. The Wesley Guild and the Christian Endeavour have been an highway from the Sunday school to the Church, and along this hosts of intelligent and high-minded youths are passing every year. Methodism is greatly indebted to these two organizations for much of its most promising life.

But it is before the idea of supplantation that the careful observer hesitates. He cannot but share in all the praise that is freely bestowed upon the more recent institutions of Methodism. In common with others, he feels that it is their due. But the suggestion that they are destined to play the part of the supplanter, and to drive the class-meeting from its ancient pedestal arouses his critical faculty. To supplant is more than to perform a mere act. It is also to

make an insinuation. When the Wesley Guild and the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour claim that they have taken the place of the class-meeting, they virtually say, at the same time, that they are better qualified to carry on the ministry of the class-meeting, at any rate, among the rising generations of Methodism. They push aside, and then insinuate a claim.

But is it true either that these societies do take the place of the class-meeting, or that they carry on its ministry more effectively ? An unbiased comparison must surely lead any one to give a negative answer. The two classes of meeting are distinct in aim. The Wesley Guild and the Christian Endeavour cover a wider field than the class-meeting. They are of a more general character. 'The Wesley Guild is a Young People's Society, closely linked to the Church, holding periodical meetings for devotional, literary, and social purposes, and seeking to interest its members in the various spheres of active Christian service.' This description applies most accurately to the kindred organization of the Christian Endeavour. It will be seen that the field covered is very wide indeed—devotional, literary, and social. While, therefore, a place is given to the devotional, there are meetings when the whole time is occupied by studying extracts

from the poets, or free and easy conversation is sustained. No complaint is raised against these features. They are admirable in themselves and calculated to do much good. They are only mentioned to indicate how complex is the aim of these Young People's Societies. On the other hand, the class-meeting concentrates upon the purely spiritual experiences and aspirations and duties of the man. It contracts the circle of its application. It seeks primarily to diagnose the condition of the soul, and then to prescribe for its greater well-being. All the exercises of the class-meeting concentrate upon this endeavour.

The two classes of meetings are distinct in methods of operation. The Wesley Guild and the Christian Endeavour arrange programmes for the quarter. Topics are chosen and allotted to various members, who give short addresses or read papers upon them. The conduct of the weekly meetings is changed every week, while all the active members at least are expected to take some part. The method of response varies. Some of the Endeavourers give their Christian experience, especially as it throws light upon the topic of the evening, but the majority read extracts from periodicals or recite verses of Scripture or of some hymn. The meetings are undoubtedly interesting,

and while the great danger of them is a kind of unreality in response, they are capable of exercising deep spiritual influence over the members. But in the class-meeting the outstanding feature is personal treatment. The leader always takes charge of the meeting, he knows each member intimately, he himself enjoys a rich spiritual experience, and he belongs to that noble race of Christian labourers who 'study to shew themselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.' He solicits a free statement of one's religious joys and difficulties. And then, like a skilful physician, he sets about binding up the broken places and healing the wounds, and counselling how best to continue the journey, and revealing, for the saint's encouragement, just a little of the glory that shall be! Much as young people may love their Endeavour or Guild, it cannot for a moment take the place of the class-meeting in this respect. It cannot, because it was never intended to do so. Mr. Christien very truly says: 'The class-meeting is an ever-recurring inquiry into present experience. It is an assertion that the soul can no more live upon the past than upon the future, and in this way we are for ever keeping the only scriptural view of true religion before the minds

of our people.'[1] And the two classes of meetings are distinct in results. It is no disparagement of the Young People's Societies to say that, while they develop character, and prepare their members for service in the Church, they do not touch the deepest *spiritual* capacities. They inform the mind and cherish the love that thinketh no evil and inspire a measure of Christian experience, but they do not fathom the hidden depths nor lead the soul into the immediate presence of the King. Prominent Endeavourers have been heard to admit this, and for this reason continued their attendance at the class-meeting. But the class-meeting rarely fails to do this. Some of the brightest ornaments of the Methodist ministry are the products of this fellowship. And many of the most useful laymen, both in the Church and in the wider circle of public life, trace their spiritual obligations to the same benefactor. The treatment of a godly class-leader, the personal introspection exercised, the hungering and thirsting after righteousness which is fostered, the humble and yet glad testimony of others, and the atmosphere weighted with the fragrance of a spiritual incense—these are conditions that appeal to the best in every man. They awaken his holiest desires and fortify his

[1] *Our Debt to the Class-Meeting*, p. 6.

noble resolutions, and lead him into ' a place of broad rivers and streams ; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby.'

Whatever, therefore, may be said in favour of the more recent organizations of the Church, it is a serious thing to attempt to push aside the class-meeting. Neither the Wesley Guild nor the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour can take its place. And, truth to tell, there should be no wish for such a consummation. The two classes of meetings can run together, with this proviso, that the trend of influence is always towards, and not away from, the class-meeting. The true functions of the Young People's Societies, at least so far as Methodism is concerned, should be to feed and not to starve the class-meeting.

(2) It is further claimed that meetings for the study of the Bible are calculated to do more good than the class-meeting, and should be substituted for it wherever possible. And it is added that those people will attend such gatherings who refuse absolutely to countenance the class.

One of the most hopeful signs of the times is the rediscovery of the priceless value of the Bible. Too long have people been immersed in reading other books, while the Book of books has remained unopened.

The Bible is the harbinger of all that is noble and pure and good. Matthew Arnold wrote: 'Men cannot do without it; for they want happiness, and happiness is the result of righteousness, and righteousness is to be found in the Bible.' Dr. Chalmers wrote: 'If I were asked to specify the likeliest prescription for the well-being of the soul, I should say it was a prayerful reading of the Bible.' M. Guizot, whom Dr. R. F. Horton [1] calls the greatest Frenchman of the century, was asked one day what in his opinion was the cause of the moral, political, and social evils of France; and the historian of European civilization answered, 'Want of faith. Nothing can stand, nothing can prosper, without faith.' 'What, then, is the remedy?' inquired his interlocutor. 'The Gospel! Preach the Word! Circulate the Holy Scriptures!'

> Word of the everlasting God,
> Will of His glorious Son;
> Without Thee how could earth be trod,
> Or heaven itself be won?

There are clear evidences that the Bible is returning to its own. Classes are being formed, adult schools organized, home-circles established for the purpose of studying its message and diffusing more widely a knowledge of God. Dr. James M. Gray, in a most suggestive little book, entitled *How to Master the*

[1] *England's Danger*, p. 123.

English Bible, indicates how the desire for Bible study has grown on the other side of the Atlantic. He tells of churches, in which this particular gathering is one of the most popular and largely attended of all the services. On this side of the Atlantic the evidences of a revived interest are just as clear. There are churches in Britain where the classes for Bible study can count their members by the hundreds.

But to assume that here is something that can take the place of the class-meeting shows a strange confusion of the facts of the case. It is probably one of those instances where the wish is father to the thought.

Meetings for Bible study may, of course, be devotional. They often are. But the emphasis is upon the intellectual. Those who attend the meetings do so for the purpose of gaining a better acquaintance with the Scriptures. They take the portions chosen for the day and concentrate attention upon them. There is no appeal to personal experience. Indeed, there is scarcely a mention of such a thing. It is merely an intellectual endeavour, a praiseworthy effort to understand and become familiar with the one Book common to the human race. But there is nothing in such a meeting that even touches, much less supplants, the ministry of the class-meeting. In the latter, the personal element is supreme. And

if the Bible is used at all, it is more to illustrate or enforce some truth of personal life.

Moreover, the Bible-class does not postulate a Christian experience in those who attend it. Men of all shades of opinion join these gatherings. There is no inquiry into their belief. They are free to accept what they like, so far as the Bible-class itself is concerned. But the class-meeting at least requires an earnest desire 'to flee from the wrath to come.' An unbelieving man would never dream of regularly attending it. A sceptic would scarcely feel at liberty to state all that was in his mind. This is a fundamental difference between the two types of meeting. It shows most clearly that the one can never very well do the work of the other. Their objects differ, their method of procedure differs, and their respective types of membership have little in common.

It is quite evident, therefore, that Bible-classes can only be allowed to push out the class-meeting at considerable loss to the church involved. It means practically that there is an end to those spiritual exercises which, ever since the days of Wesley, have played such an important part in Methodism and fostered a spirit of sanctified audacity in seeking for pastures new. Indeed, experience raises a warning voice. There are some Methodist churches where

the Bible-class has supplanted the class-meeting. And the results are not reassuring. The special benefits which Wesley designed should accrue from the class-meeting are almost entirely wanting. Most of all, that realized spirit of brotherhood which has always been a marked feature of the Methodist Movement is conspicuous by its absence. Dr. Rigg says quite truly: 'The Methodist class-meeting is not a mere Bible-class for inquirers who pursue a course of Scripture reading. Such classes are truly valuable. . . . But they are essentially different from the "Society classes," to use the old name of John Wesley's Methodism.'

(3) It is once more contended that the band-meeting is capable of supplying all the requirements for which the class-meeting was primarily instituted. One supposed advantage of the band-meeting is that there is no personal dealing with the members. The leader does not address himself to each. The meeting is thrown open. There is absolute liberty. No one is kept in fear and trembling because his turn to speak is coming. And yet, while there is this 'liberty,' there is personal testimony. In the majority of cases, those who attend the band-meeting speak or pray, and that without any solicitation from the leader.

The band-meeting is an honoured institution of Methodism. Wesley himself organized it, and all down the course of the eventful history of the great Revival, it has played a prominent part. And the band-meeting is not effete yet. Many Methodist churches glory in having a real live band-meeting associated with them. It has been said that this service, held on a Saturday evening, is the place where preachers and teachers alike get their tools sharpened for the Sabbath work, and where members of the congregation receive influences which remove the crust of worldliness from their hearts and the dimness of vision, caused by contact with sordid avocations, from the eyes. Certain it is that the band-meeting has proved to be this in the case of many. It is a means of grace of the highest value, and Methodism cannot afford to abolish it.

But to say that the band-meeting supplies all the purposes of the class-meeting is another thing. If this is so, why did Wesley institute both types of service? The fact is, Wesley designed that the one should meet one class of needs, while the other was ordained to fill up an altogether different lack.

Moreover, the band-meeting, as already indicated, does not countenance direct personal treatment, which immediately disqualifies it to take the place

of the class-meeting. It encourages general testimony, but of an exhortative and confessional nature. But that is not enough. There is also need for a means of grace where the personal element is emphasized and each member is treated directly. Only thus can those specific objects be achieved which Wesley considered to be among the most important attainments in any Christian communion.

And, further, the fruits of the band-meeting are not of the same quality as those produced by the class-meeting. General treatment never does answer so well as particular treatment. In scholastic circles there is abundant proof of this. Where the teacher deals with the whole class of boys, without making any distinction between likely and unlikely scholars, only moderate results are gained. But when he gives particular attention to each scholar and tries to meet the peculiarities of disposition as well as of endowments which show themselves, the teacher is rewarded with achievements of the most satisfactory kind. And it is the personal treatment in the class-meeting, the application of the leader's touch to each case, that has led to such splendid and abiding results. The band-meeting may be able to give full proof of its ministry, but it supplies no fruit that can compare in quality

to that which is the natural product of the class-meeting.

From whatever standpoint we view it, the suggestion of supplanting the class-meeting proves untenable. The Young People's Societies are doing a great work, the meetings for Bible study must be warmly commended, and the well-tried band-meeting is still a boon to Church life; but neither one nor all of these push out the class-meeting. They move in different channels; they touch different chords. The class-meeting remains pre-eminent in its own peculiar ministry. 'There is no substitute that could, as an established means of grace, supply its lack.'[1]

Shakespeare says:

> The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
> Grapple them to thy soul with hooks of steel;
> But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
> Of each new-hatched, unfledged comrade.

This is timely advice for the Methodist in regard to his attitude to the class-meeting. Whatever may be said of new organizations, this has proved its utility in practical ways, and is not lightly to be set aside. In the words of the recommendation of the committee appointed by the Wesleyan Conference to consider the question of Church membership: 'The Conference, recognizing the fact that Church

[1] Dr. Rigg.

membership implies some form of Christian fellowship, expresses its profound conviction that no better method of satisfying the requirement has been devised than the class-meeting, and therefore strongly urges upon ministers, class-leaders, and members alike the duty of vigorously maintaining this valued institution in the Wesleyan Methodist Church.'[1]

[1] *Minutes*, 1907, p. 532.

IS IT ESSENTIAL?

CAN the class-meeting be surrendered? Is it indispensable to the continued success of Methodism? Is there any good reason why its declination should cause grave anxiety? 'These are questions of serious import. They do not belong to the speculative or the curious, but to the practical and the fundamental. They cannot be answered by an *ipse dixit*, but must be answered, if at all, by facts and arguments that will commend themselves to the intelligence of cultured men, and harmonize with the deepest religious instincts of spiritually-minded men.'[1]

It follows, from what has been said, that many believe the class-meeting is not essential to the future progress of Methodism, that it can be surrendered, as a primary institution of the Church, without any misgiving. Indeed, those who are of this opinion

[1] Dr. Sutherland.

argue that already it is obsolete or played out, and that Methodists should welcome those modern institutions, which have impressed themselves so favourably upon the ecclesiastical mind.

On the other hand, there are those who feel convinced that the class-meeting is most essential. These consider that to surrender it would be for Methodism to shed one of its vital parts. They look upon the class-meeting as the centre around which the other devotional services of Methodism revolve and from which they received much of their strength and effectiveness. On this side are ranged some of the most distinguished sons and daughters of the Methodist family. Young and old, learned and illiterate, join hands here, and protest that the class-meeting must not be moved from the place it has so long adorned.

John Wesley evidently believed that this institution was part and parcel of Methodism. No sooner was it firmly established than he confessed his sense of its inestimable value. He caused the class-meeting to be organized wherever his work took root. He even gave it precedence over the Society, considering that if it was set going, the wider fellowship of the Society would soon follow. Wesley refused to recognize those who claimed to be Methodists and

yet neglected to meet the leader in class once a week. He went to the extreme of requiring all who desired to be members regularly to attend this means of grace, and systematically to support the financial responsibilities of the work. In all the wonderful record of the *Journal*, a record of strenuous endeavour and self-effacement with which the labours of the Apostle Paul alone can compare, there is not a single sentence to encourage the idea that Wesley believed any other than that the class-meeting was absolutely indispensable to the continued prosperity and development of the work. Again and again the reader meets with statements which show how ardent was the love of Wesley for this institution. Sometimes this love compelled expression in the most emphatic terms, as when referring to the good effects of the class-meeting in London. 'The unspeakable usefulness of the institution has ever since (the day of its establishment in London) been more and more manifest.'

This is the view which many, perhaps the majority of Methodists, take to-day. In spite of the able arguments which are brought against the continued efficiency of the class-meeting, in spite of the pleas lodged in favour of Young People's Societies and such services as the band-meeting, they are sure that the class-meeting is not out-of-date, that it is not

suffering from a kind of senile decay, that it is not eclipsed by more aggressive organizations, but that it remains, what it has always been, an effective means of grace, and an indispensable factor of the Methodist economy. They subscribe, gladly and solemnly, to the confession: 'We know not in what language adequately to express our conviction that the Lord and Head of the Church has used the institution of the class-meeting as an instrument of blessing to thousands of His saints; nor can we sufficiently express our sense of the evil of any feeling, any movement, or any attempt which would tend to lessen the regard of our people for that institution, or to render their attendance at these classes irregular.'[1]

Dr. Sutherland, speaking for Canadian Methodism, observes: 'Those who are familiar with the history of the class-meeting, and have had experience of its helpfulness in the cultivation of a true religious life, will be the very last to say that it should be abolished or allowed to fall into disuse.' Dr. Rigg, speaking as a British Methodist, says of the Wesleyan Church, that, 'Without the weekly class-meeting, Wesleyan Methodism would be at an end.' The Rev. W. L. Watkinson, in the course of a speech delivered in the Great Queen Street Wesleyan Chapel, London, on

[1] Anon.

Wednesday evening, July 17, 1907, declared that the class-meeting 'is the primal organ of their Church, and, whilst the physiologist would tell them that in the course of generations an organ might become useless, and might be eliminated, he had never read yet that there had been an instance where a creature had survived after its heart had been taken away.' And others who belong to the more liberal schools of Methodism declare themselves in the same definite way.

It is, perhaps, as well to emphasize the point that all sections of Methodism furnish representatives of this view, lest it might be thought that it is entertained only by those who have no sympathy with progressive schemes and ideals. At the present time controversy is very keen about the 'test of membership.' The controversy arose in the councils of the Wesleyan body, but it has extended to all the branches of Methodism. It is a matter of supreme importance. But those who argue for greater latitude in the 'test of membership' do not necessarily oppose the class-meeting as effete or unnecessary. Many who are prominent advocates for broadening the basis of membership are among the most ardent admirers of the class-meeting, as a means of grace. They realize the immense interests at stake. They know the splendid

history of the institution, they have a personal experience of its power and sufficiency, they look upon it as an old and well-tried friend, and the last wish they entertain is that it should ever disappear from the list of Methodist observances. At the British Wesleyan Methodist Conference of 1907, held in London, the committee of the Pastoral Session adopted the following resolution: 'The committee, *whilst convinced that the class-meeting is vital to the best interests of Methodism,*[1] is nevertheless of opinion that the time has come for such a revision of the rules relating to the conditions of membership as will remove the anomalies and inequalities of our present system, &c., &c.'[2] Here is clear proof, if proof be needed, that so far as Wesleyan Methodists are concerned, the reformers agree with those who deprecate any change whatsoever, and assert that the class-meeting is as essential as ever.

(1) The class-meeting is the differentiating characteristic of Methodism. Most sections of the Christian Church have some particular feature of organization which marks them off from the rest. It is the family trait. Wherever people find it, they know thereby that they are in contact with a certain section of

[1] The italics are the author's.

[2] *Minutes*, p. 534.

the Church. For instance, the Roman Catholic communion lays stress upon the advantages of the confessional. Its sons and daughters are exhorted to attend the confessional, and warned of certain pains and penalties if they disobey. The confessional is the central point of Roman Catholicism. Around it all the other pretensions, whether great or small, gather. It is the hall-mark of the Church. The Episcopalian proper condemns the confessional and substitutes for it the pre-eminence of the sacraments. It is of the first importance that loyal sons of the Church observe the sacraments, as duly administered by the clergy of the Church. That is the one devotional service which must not be overlooked, for, in addition to the idea of communion, there are certain well-defined benefits received by the communicant. The Episcopalian is distinguished by his particular interpretation and observance of the sacraments. The Congregationalist has his prayer-meeting, while the Baptist is most devoted to that *sanctum* into which only immersed believers are allowed to pass. But the Methodist has the class-meeting. He reverently and loyally and periodically approaches the Lord's Table, and eats the bread in remembrance that Christ died for him, and drinks the wine to set forth that the Blood of Jesus Christ,

God's Son, cleanses him from all sin. He also finds unlimited joy in the meeting for prayer. But the class-meeting is his great distinction. It is the service by which he is marked out from other believers. The class-meeting is Methodism. And Methodism is the class-meeting. The two are indissolubly associated. If one is tampered with or removed, the other is certain materially to suffer. 'The Methodist Church is a contexture, a web of such class-meetings; do away with these classes and the whole web, the whole vital growth and structure of Methodism, is destroyed. As a Church system it would no longer exist. The class-meeting is the matrix within which every element characteristic of Methodism is nurtured in vital union with the whole growth and development of its Church life.'[1]

Every one recognizes this. Speak to a man about a Methodist church, and he will immediately think of a company of believing people, who have, as one of their most cherished possessions, a weekly gathering for Christian testimony and prayer. This attribute is connoted by the term Methodist Church, wherever it is used. In Britain and across the seas, people associate the one as the outstanding feature of the other. And this is strictly true, whether the people

[1] Dr. Rigg.

themselves belong to the Methodist Communion or not.

But surrender the class-meeting and what follows? Methodism is shorn of its most prominent characteristic. The hall-mark of its separateness is erased. Its differentiation is no longer clear. Here is a company of soldiers. Any one can tell that they are soldiers, both from their military bearing and from their conversation. But the men wear a dazzling uniform, and by that even strangers can locate their place in the army. Without the uniform, it is hard to tell. It may even be impossible. So the class-meeting is as the uniform of Methodism. Remove the uniform, and while the piety and aggressiveness of Methodists will still prove them to belong to the great army of God, it will be less easy to say what particular branch of the army they really form.

(2) The class-meeting is still the best conservatory of the spiritual life of the Methodist Church. This has been one of its most valuable services in the past. Converts, fresh from the place of consecration, prodigals, with the noise of the music and dancing which followed the Father's welcome sounding in their ears, staid and ripened believers, who have taken 'root downwards and borne fruit upwards,' have all experienced the power of its strengthening

and preserving ministry. And it still is the one means of grace which draws together the spiritual forces of Methodism and fosters their most active life. It would not be fair to say that there is no spiritual experience outside the class-meeting. Indeed, one very gladly and thankfully admits that among those who do not attend the class-meeting, who feel little sympathy for its method of service, there are many bright and shining lights—men and women who through faith have inherited the promises and whose unstinted goodness is like ointment poured forth. But in the class-meeting are gathered those whose religious interests have become their chief concern, who are pre-eminently sensitive to the sovereign claims of the Lord Jesus Christ, who study to know in what manner and in what direction advance might be expedited, and who are willing to *abandon* themselves, if only desire might become accomplished fact.

Mention has been made of the idea elaborated by Mr. Bradfield in his pamphlet on *Church Membership*. He speaks of the class-meeting as being *the meeting of the Church*. In it assemble those who have declared their faith in the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ and been received as members of the Methodist Church. These details are worth careful observation, for their suggestiveness is even more than the plain

statement. The class-meeting is composed of people who have a definite experience of saving grace, and who have a sufficiently deep interest in the welfare of the religious work of the Church to induce them to have their names enrolled upon the register. But in these conditions reside all that which makes for the best life and greatest usefulness of the Church. Here are conserved the very forces which in the past have turned to flight the armies of the aliens, and which in the present are capable of waxing valiant in the fight. It is only a case of natural sequence, effect following cause, when it is found that in the fellowship of the class-meeting spring those schemes for evangelistic endeavour, whose very daring amaze all but the boldest spirits, and that out of it come those consecrated servants of the Evangel whose courage remains undaunted. Shakespeare says:

> He's truly valiant that can suffer
> The worst that man can breathe; and make his wrongs
> His outsides; to wear them like his raiment, carelessly;
> And ne'er prefer his injuries to his heart,
> To bring it into danger.

And such is the type of Christian soldier the class-meeting sends forth.

Hence, as an institution of Methodism, it is essential. The descendants of Wesley still need a means of grace, in which the best of the life of the

Church can be gathered, and from which great schemes and greater men may spring. Mr. Bradfield says: 'For us to give up the claim that the Church should meet, as a Church, apart from the world, where all the gifts of the members may be exercised for mutual edification, would be a most calamitous retrogression and cowardly refusal to go up and possess the good land.'

(3) The history of the class-meeting furnishes an additional argument in favour of its maintenance. There can be no doubt that this institution has rendered invaluable service in the past. Wesley and a host of others bear glowing testimony to this, and the records of history are a complete confirmation of such statements. Now, the argument is that what has proved so serviceable to the generations gone by may yet prove just as serviceable, and perhaps more so, to the generations unborn. At any rate, it is inexpedient to cast aside our benefactor until there is another, equally generous, to take his place. Here is an unpretentious arbour nestling on the side of the highway that leads circuitously across the hills. It is the only place where weary travellers can obtain refreshment and shelter. It has stood there for years, and many are the hearts its hospitality has cheered. But though it is of long standing,

this arbour retains its power to meet all the needs of those who pass that way. And it is the only one to be found anywhere upon those bleak hills. It would be folly, it would be a crime to dismantle that arbour and to bolt its doors! The long and splendid history of the place, in addition to the consideration that it can still meet all dues and demands, pleads for salvation from such a fate. And it is a plea which reasonable men cannot ignore. Similarly, the class-meeting entreats those who would remove it from its place of eminence to ponder its record of the past. That record will bear the minutest examination, for many a traveller in life's hard way has been cared for and nurtured and restored through its ministry. And inasmuch as it stands alone in the way, it cannot be closed up. Its continued existence is absolutely necessary. It is a friend, a friend endeared to many by reason of years of intercourse and helpfulness.

> Time draweth wrinkles in a fair face,
> But addeth fresh colours to a fast friend,
> Which neither heat, nor cold, nor misery,
> Nor place, nor destiny, can alter or diminish.

(4) Moreover, the class-meeting has no substitute. If it is surrendered, there is no other service that can exactly take its place. The relative claims of supposed

competitors have been considered in a previous chapter.[1] The Wesley Guild and the kindred Society of the Young People's Christian Endeavour have many excellent features and are doing a great work for the higher well-being of young Methodism; but they can never take the place of the class-meeting. Their constitution is of such a kind that this is practically impossible. Nor is the band-meeting likely to succeed any better. It, too, has its excellences and enjoys considerable support. But it is no real competitor of the class-meeting. After these there is nothing left. It is not suggested that the prayer-meeting can fulfil the functions of Christian testimony. Bible-study circles are equally incapable. So that the class-meeting is left without any rival. It is the only means of grace where those particular benefits of which Wesley thought can be found. In the class-meeting, and there only, are the members of the Church drawn into close and intimate friendship, and made to feel the splendours as well as the obligations of the brotherhood of those who are in Christ. There, too, irregularities are most effectively checked and the spiritual forces that operate in sanctified hearts drilled and marshalled. And there also abide the conditions which make possible the

[1] 'Is It Supplanted?'

most hallowed communion between God and His people.

This is admitted by all reliable authorities. Those who have most closely studied the various aspects of the question are convinced that this institution remains, for the present at least, without a rival. It is the only organization that can adequately meet the requirements that push themselves to the front. This is the deliberate opinion of many of the most distinguished Methodists of Britain, and the same view is taken by those across the seas, who are qualified to speak.

But if this is the case, to ask Methodists to surrender the class-meeting is to invite them to commit an act of self-destruction, to wield a sword which certainly will compass their own ruin. For if the class-meeting is put aside and there is no adequate substitute for it, Methodists lose those conditions of fellowship which, most of all, have contributed to their striking success. They are stranded. They have given up what was proving efficacious, only to find that they are left with broken cisterns that hold no water. But this is to ask too much. Methodists who love their class-meeting must be excused if they refuse the invitation and prefer to hold fast that which they have, until something better is presented. They cannot take

any other course. They dare not. The risks are too heavy. 'It is an axiom of wisdom never to part with a good thing in possession until you can provide a better; and until the day comes when we can devise something that will fulfil all the purposes of the class-meeting more perfectly, consecrated common sense insists that we should continue the institution as it is.'[1]

(5) The present is trustee for the future. The present has entered into the accumulated wealth of the past, but not as absolute proprietor. The duty of the present is to receive from the past, to enhance what it receives, and then to hand it on to the future.

This is the case in regard to national liberties. The great responsibility of those who occupy the platform of life's affairs is that they must not lose any of those advantages which their forefathers won for them at the point of the sword.

'Tis liberty that crowns Britannia's Isle,
And makes her barren rocks and her bleak mountains smile.

The present generation must zealously guard, and if possible increase this, so that when they come to leave the platform those who follow after will have a still greater and grander heritage to enjoy. And patriotism inspires no nobler ambition. Love for home and country will ever express itself in a manly

[1] Christien's *Debt to the Class-Meeting*, p. 21.

resolution to play one's part well, and to enrich and beautify the estate which passes down in perpetuity from sire to son.

And it is the case in regard to religious liberties. Methodists, along with others, value the great Protestant heritage. They understand that in that heritage are blessings which were purchased by blood. And they know that the blessings themselves are much more precious than rubies, that their real worth cannot be told. They enjoy these blessings. They delight in the privilege of direct access to God, in an open Bible, in the priesthood of believers, in the communion of the Lord's Supper. They repeat the protest of their fathers against the arrogant pretensions of the Pope of Rome, and vow their determination to hand on these blessings unsullied to their children. It is because high-minded men feel the obligations of their trusteeship that they resent so bitterly the treacherous conduct of those who seem determined to bring England back into its old bondage to Rome.

It is equally the case so far as the class-meeting is concerned. Methodists of the present generation received the class-meeting as one of their family heirlooms. It had passed from generation to generation, sent on its eventful course by the hand of Wesley. It is here to-day, but not as the absolute property of

those who have inherited it, to be disposed of as they please. It has come for the purpose of contributing as much as possible to the strength and development of the present. And when this has been done, it must be allowed to continue its journey into the future.

Therefore, for any one to stand in the way and to seize this heirloom and destroy it, is not only a serious wrong to the heirloom itself but also a worse wrong to those generations who will be deprived of its beneficent ministry. The suggestion is intolerable. The children of Methodism look to the members of the present to play the man, to do as they would be done by, to cherish, preserve, and enhance that good thing which has been committed to their care, and then to pass it on for the good of those who shall follow in their steps. The present has no right to impoverish the future. 'To injure it (the class-meeting) in any way would be to sin against those who will come after us. The present is the vassal of the past, and the future is the child of the present. The Methodism of the next generation is being made by this. And if our Church to-day should set light by this precious means of grace it would not only fatally impoverish itself, but rob the future of that which we ought loyally and gratefully to leave behind

us as a priceless legacy. And this would be sin.'[1]

It appears, therefore, that there can be only one answer to the question. The class-meeting is essential. The best interests of Methodism require that it be carefully preserved and handed on to those who shall come after. The needs of the present are of such a kind that the institution cannot be surrendered. These needs make it imperative. 'Inasmuch as the class-meeting is a form of spiritual fellowship in harmony with the doctrine and practice of the primitive Church, pre-eminently calculated to develop and conserve the life of God in the soul, the Conference cherishes the hope that, through the loyalty and devotion of the leaders, and by the blessing of God, as in the past, so in the future, it will prove to be a distinctive feature of our Church life, and an inestimable means of grace of which our people generally will gladly avail themselves.'[2]

What James Montgomery says of the Church Universal, Methodists can truly say of this particular institution of their section of the Church:

> The lighthouse founded on a rock,
> Casts o'er the flood its radiant eye;
> Firm amidst ocean's heaviest shock,
> Serene beneath the stormiest sky.

[1] Christien's *Debt to the Class-Meeting*, p. 21.

[2] *Minutes*, 1907, *p.* 533.

Though winds and waters rage and foam,
  Though darkness lowers like Egypt's night,
Here peace and safety find a home;
  In this small Goshen there is light.

Nor for itself it stands alone;
  The seaman's friend, it shines from far,
As though an angel from the throne
  Came down to be his leading star.

It warns to shun the breakers near,
  Smooth into port the vessel guides;
Points where a wider course to steer,
  Shows how to 'scape conflicting tides.

Thus built upon eternal truth,
  High in mid-heaven, o'er land and sea,
Christ's Church holds forth to age and youth
  A beacon and a sanctuary.

A SUGGESTION

OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

OF THE IDEAL

OF THE PRACTICABLE

'The man who lives under an habitual sense of the divine presence keeps up a perpetual cheerfulness of temper, and enjoys every moment the satisfaction of thinking himself in company with his dearest and best friends. The time never lies heavy upon him; it is impossible for him to be alone. His thoughts and passions are the most busied at such hours when those of other men are the most inactive. He no sooner steps out of the world but his heart burns with devotion, swells with hope, and triumphs in the consciousness of that presence which everywhere surrounds him; or, on the contrary, pours out its fears, its sorrows, its apprehensions to the great Supporter of its existence.'—ADDISON, 1672-1719.

OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

IT is contended that the class-meeting is indispensable to the further success and development of Methodism. This statement applies to Methodism as a whole, for the class-meeting equally belongs to the parent and to the children of this great organization. No section of the Methodist family that values its strength and influence can afford to overlook the claims of the class-meeting. It is 'the germ-cell, out of which the whole tissue and texture of Methodism is perpetually reproduced and developed.'

But what type of class-meeting is indispensable? There are class-meetings *and* class-meetings. Indeed, one is met with an almost endless variety of type. Leaders and members have too often become a law to themselves, and evolved a type according to their own fancy. No wonder that the man who is anxious to understand this question and to make himself

familiar with the outstanding features of the institution, feels hopeless about arriving at any satisfactory conclusion. He is at a loss to know how to measure the different claims that are urged upon him. He sees in all the types the one family trait, but after that has been admitted, he finds there are scarcely two types alike. Hence the question, What type of class-meeting is indispensable? Out of the endless variety that appears, which is the one to be preserved and perpetuated?

Some of the types with which the inquirer meets are not to be encouraged. They have very little in common with the real class-meeting. They are merely counterfeits and largely responsible for the neglect and consequent weakness which earnest Methodists deplore. These counterfeits vitiate the taste, cause dimness to the vision, lose sight of the ideal, and encourage their unsuspecting victims to cling to a shadow while the substance passes by on the other side. Therefore, they are impossible. And they must not be permitted to monopolize places to which they have no right.

(1) There is that type of class-meeting which practically is a second band-meeting. To this all and sundry members of the congregation are invited. There is no list of recognized members. The class-

book is tabooed as the instrument of an intolerable separatism. Fellowship is without money and without price. The meeting itself is conducted on the most general lines. Sometimes the leader takes charge of it, at other times this duty is fulfilled by one of the members. Each person present speaks at the time and in the manner he wishes. And no observation is made if any remain silent. Throughout the whole meeting there is no appeal of leader to members, no word of direct counsel or exhortation. The personal element is almost entirely expunged.

There are many class-meetings of this type in the Methodism of to-day. Probably it is the type that enjoys most favour. In the ranks both of the parent body and of the various branches there are leaders who argue that this is the only type that can command any support. But it is wise carefully to consider, before such a statement is accepted.

This type of meeting is well enough as a band-meeting. As such it is capable of rendering splendid service. The Methodist band-meeting is one of the glories of the historic movement. It has played a great part in fostering the best life and most active service with which the Church has been blessed. But a band-meeting is not a class-meeting. It never can be. The titles are not synonymous. They do

not connote the same characteristics. It is wrong, therefore, to speak of a band-meeting as a class-meeting. Such language is misleading. It is even mischievous.

The essence of the class-meeting is the catechetical method of personal treatment. This is its differentiating feature, that the leader approaches each member and addresses himself to his particular religious condition. But there is nothing of this in the type in question. The leader speaks generally, and the members testify as they choose.

Moreover, this type does considerable harm to the interests of the genuine thing. When members are not accustomed to the catechetical method they do not get to like it. Apart from its special excellences, personal likes and dislikes gain the ascendency, and well-tried customs suffer through prejudice. The leaders also lose touch with the particular obligations of their office. They feel that the band-meeting type of service is much less of a strain upon them, and the little remnant of the old Adam-nature that leans to self-indulgence asserts itself. They argue that if the members prefer this kind of service they have no right to raise objections.

But what is more serious still, the consequence of the change brought about in the relations of leaders

and members is disastrous. The leader no longer exerts that singular influence and authority over the members which has always been one of the chief distinctions of the office. Personal treatment fosters mutual confidence between member and leader. It is because the leader has patiently listened to his sorrows as well as to his joys, and helped him amid troubles heavy to be borne, that the member feels that here at least he has a sincere friend, one upon whom he can lean hard.

The band-meeting type of class-meeting, therefore, must not be encouraged. Its influence is against the interests of the real thing. It sets aside the unique advantages of personal treatment, it vitiates the taste for personal inquiry, and it tends to destroy that close and confidential relationship that exists between leader and people. The type is undoubtedly responsible for much of the dislike which is shown to the real class-meeting; and for that reason alone it should be carefully watched by all who have the best interests of the more important institution at heart.

(2) There is the Bible-class type of class-meeting. Here, again, the general invitation is in vogue. The meeting is open for any one who desires to study the Word of God. It is not strictly, as Wesley put it, 'a desire to flee from the wrath to come,' but a wish

to understand what he reads. And whoever can show this credential is cordially welcomed. Also the leader of this class is more correctly called the teacher. His work is to teach, to impart knowledge, to build up the beautiful temple of truth within the realm of conscience, and to fit his scholars to deal successfully with some of the deeper problems of life. He chooses a series of lessons, or he may take a particular book of the Bible. And meeting after meeting he gives a careful exposition of the text, to the delight and edification of those who attend. Of course, the meeting itself is commenced and closed with praise and prayer ; and, in many cases, time is allowed for conversation.

So far as this type of class-meeting is concerned, it undoubtedly is on the increase. In many Methodist churches it has been accepted as a suitable substitute for Wesley's class-meeting. Especially have those members who shrink from being required to state their religious experience, hailed it. These are quite sure of its greater usefulness, while they insist it retains the real design of the founder of Methodism.

But no amount of ingenious argument can prove that a Bible-reading is a class-meeting. It is not. There is no question raised about the value of Bible-reading. ' The Bible Christian is a strong Christian.'

The more of this class of gathering Methodists have the better it will be for every phase of their church life. It is through intimate knowledge of the Bible that 'the man of God becomes throughly furnished unto all good works.' But the Bible-reading is not a class-meeting. The same objections immediately arise as beset the claim of the band-meeting. There is an entire lack of the very conditions that make for a class-meeting. For instance, in the Bible-reading there is no direct appeal of leader to member. Christian experience is not called upon to express itself; the relation of leader and scholar is often very formal; and the results produced are in many cases purely intellectual. There is no spiritual fervour, and consequently very little, if any, spiritual joy. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the purposes for which Wesley organized the class-meeting are largely nullified by the Bible-reading. They are left severely alone.

Hence there is only one conclusion possible, so far as this type is concerned. It is not the type which Methodists, as a whole, declare to be essential. On the other hand, it is to be discouraged, for it also belongs to the list of 'Impossibles.'

(3) There is that type of class-meeting which should, by right, be called a preaching-service. Now

in this type the meetings are more seclusive. There is a roll of membership and a regular leader. Most of the details of the original type of service are strictly observed. Prayers are said, devotional hymns are sung, names are called, and weekly contributions are paid. The one startling innovation of the older class-meeting is that personal treatment is abolished for something else. The leader, perhaps in deference to the wishes of some of his members, decides not to invite the experience of each member. He has found a more excellent way. So he chooses some appropriate text of Scripture and prepares a helpful little homily and delivers this to a circle of attentive and grateful followers. No time is allowed for testimony. But this is by design. The members wish it. They gather at the specified time, they sing and pray and listen to this homily, they sing again and perhaps engage in a few more prayers, pronounce the benediction and return home. They have been to class! They are Methodists, loyal and true!

There is no quarrel whatever with religious addresses. They are among the most potent and gracious of those influences which, like a leaven, are moving society at large and guiding men home to God. The attendance at preaching-services is the justification of addresses. Providing that these are well prepared

by study and prayer, people will crowd the temple and the forum, and listen with rapt attention. But the class-meeting is not the place for these. Wesley never designed the class-meeting to be a preaching-service. More probably he wished it to supplement the preaching. There was enough of preaching, but too little testimony, too little of that personal appeal from man to man, which is so searching and yet so helpful. It is an abuse of the class-meeting to turn it into a preaching-service. If the members want addresses they can easily have their fill, for sermons are like the sands of the sea-shore at least in one particular—they are numberless. Therefore, it cannot be truly said that this type is at all essential. Indeed, it is no more so than that of the band-meeting or that of the Bible-reading. Like them, it does harm, for it turns the attention of the members of Methodism from the real to the artificial, from the substance to the shadow.

(4) And there is the skeleton type. Whatever may be said against the other types named above, they alike have one merit, and that is, sincerity. Both the leaders and the members of the band-meeting type believe in the usefulness of the service and enter into its exercises with joy and expectancy. The same thing is true of those who adopt the Bible-reading

method. Indeed, the eagerness of those who support Bible-readings does much to disarm criticism. These people are, at least, in earnest. But of the skeleton type even this cannot be said That is why it is called *skeleton*. Life and energy have gone. Everything is as dull as possible. Only the skeleton of fellowship remains, and admittedly there is little to attract, but much to repel, about a skeleton.

In some cases, both leaders and members have fallen victims to this hopeless state of things. The meetings are held spasmodically; sometimes they continue for several weeks without a break, and then suddenly stop. No one knows why. They stop as if touched by some invisible hand. After an interval, they start again and pursue the same fitful course. Punctuality is a virtue conspicuous by its absence. Members assemble at various intervals from the time of the commencement of the service to half an hour afterwards. The leader is sometimes last to appear. Even then, before the service can be opened, more time must be spent in little pleasantries and idle gossip. And when it is opened, no one finds pleasure in it. The leader's duties are irksome, and he shirks what he can. The members sustain a most depressing silence. One sighs, and another looks at his watch, and a third significantly murmurs, Amen! Let a stranger

visit this type of class-meeting and he will fancy that, by some freak of nature, he is with Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones. His strongest impulse will be to escape from such a place of skeletons, lest he become a skeleton too.

Unfortunately there are such class-meetings as accord with this type. They are the bane of Methodism. They vex and annoy those who yearn for the real, spiritual fellowship; they freeze the glowing ambitions of the rising generation; they impart an impression of the class-meeting which is as false as it is pernicious; and they cause multitudes, who pine for closer communion, to demand other services that shall take the place of this, and meet a recurring need of the human race.

It is evident that this type can inspire only one judgement. It is utterly impossible. Methodism does not want it. Methodism condemns it. If there is no type better than this, then the class-meeting is doomed. Whatever its past may have been, however much Wesley esteemed it, and however often it has served as a shelter in the time of storm, the present will not tolerate it at any price. Skeletons are fit only to be buried. Their proper place is in the sepulchre. And this skeleton type of class-meeting must suffer the common doom.

OF THE IDEAL

THE type of class-meeting which is essential to Methodism, without which its best life will wither and its most effective service become impotent, is that which most nearly approximates to the original of Wesley. It keeps in view the purposes for which the institution was first organized and the methods adopted for their accomplishment. And it endeavours to perpetuate those excellences which have been so apparent to succeeding generations of Methodism. The real class-meeting still contrives to draw together believers in the bonds of Christian Brotherhood; it still watches over the spiritual difficulties and dangers of its members; it still exercises itself 'for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of

Christ' ; it still cultivates the grace of liberality by regular contributions ; and most of all, it still lays emphasis upon Wesley's method of appealing for individual testimony and of administering counsel and exhortation to each member, as occasion requires. The ideal class-meeting, therefore, is more than a band-meeting, more than a Bible-reading, more than a preaching-service, and much more than a sterile ordinance. It is a meeting in which all those principal features, about which Wesley showed such concern, are deeply honoured and observed. Its intense spirituality is its chief attractive power and the one condition that makes its ministry so valuable.

But to say so much is not to exclude the idea of possible modifications in some of its details. A few Methodists object even to this. They take up the position that if the class-meeting is tampered with at all, the result will be anything but satisfactory. But this attitude seems too severe, too biased. Prejudice unfolds a very unsavoury story. Because of it, opportunities for wider usefulness have been lost ; open doors have been locked and barred ; friendships of long standing have snapped ; and victories for God and the right have been turned into woful defeat. Prejudice in the oversight of the Lord's heritage is especially harmful. It is much better to

keep the open mind, the responsive heart to all truth, so that the evident leadings of the Holy Spirit may not be neutralized.

The point of importance is clearly to keep in mind the purposes for which the institution was established. Wesley adopted it because of certain prevailing needs. He then indicated the principal lines along which the details of its service should run. He made the catechetical method fundamental. This is the pivot upon which the class-meeting turns. But, granting this, Wesley left minor matters to local preference. Even in his own day he did not object to modifications or adaptations, so long as the real character of the meeting was not changed. 'With regard to these little prudential helps, that we are continually changing one thing after another, is not a weakness or fault, as you imagine, but a peculiar advantage which we enjoy.'[1]

The wisdom of making certain well-defined modifications in the class-meeting of to-day is widely acknowledged. Those who support this view believe that by such modifications it will gain in strength and usefulness. And it might happen also that many who stand aloof will be induced to give it their hearty support. The Rev. W. Bradfield is

[1] *Works*, viii., p. 254.

an ardent admirer of the class-meeting. In his illuminating pamphlet he argues that it cannot be surrendered, that it is capable of rendering immense service to the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ in the twentieth century, and that in its principal features it must be preserved without alloy. But Mr. Bradfield sees some reasons why certain modifications might be adopted. 'If we abide by the principle that the Church-meeting is essential, we are by no means debarred from relieving the present distress, but we are put in the best position for doing so. Our rules do not prevent us from holding our class-meeting in such ways as best meet the requirements of the day; on the contrary, our whole history encourages us to adapt them to circumstances.'[1] Dr. Sutherland speaks in much the same way. 'It may be accepted without discussion that the class-meeting, as we have it, is susceptible of improvement. It is not perfect, no human institution is; but that is no reason why we should not strive after the best that is attainable. *Keeping in mind, then, the design of the class-meeting,*[2] to promote spiritual life by means of Christian fellowship and mutual prayer, what are the most obvious ways of increasing its influence?'

[1] *Church Membership*, p. 32.

[2] The italics are the author's.

In making suggestions of the ideal it may, therefore, be necessary to indicate slight modifications, but the features upon which Wesley placed such emphasis will remain intact. The ideal is not formed upon the ruins of the past. Rather it is the completed structure, the foundation-stones of which were laid by the fathers of Methodism, but whose top-stone displays the skill and devotion of their children. In this temple the past and the present combine, so that they together furnish the dwelling-place where the soul sees its visions and dreams its dreams.

(1) *Place of meeting.* This, perhaps, is more properly an accessory of the ideal class-meeting. Some will say that it is a matter of little importance, but class-leaders know better. One of the primary conditions of a good class-meeting is that the room in which it is held is suitable for the purpose. There have been good class-meetings in a barn, a hay-loft, a blacksmith's shop, under the open heavens. God is not confined to times and seasons and places. Wordsworth says :

> Why should we crave a hallow'd spot ?
> An altar is in each man's cot,
> A church in every grove that spreads
> Its living roof above our heads.

But, while admitting all this, it remains true that a class-meeting is not hindered but greatly helped by a

suitable room for the service. A damp, chilly, and badly lighted room exerts a most depressing influence. People are susceptible to their environment. A bright day is more cheering than a cold and foggy November noon. A house situated in some swampy marsh becomes the habitation of strange misgivings and extreme morbidity. And the enthusiasm of religious people is often quelled by their being incarcerated in a kind of dungeon for the service of praise and testimony. It is not suggested that there should be a large and sumptuous room provided for the class-meeting. It is much better that the room be small, for the ideal class is small. All that is required is that the room be sufficiently commodious, that it be well warmed, well lighted, well ventilated, and well appointed. The time is near at hand when the architect and building committee of every Methodist church will be compelled to spend as much time and thought upon the class-meeting room as upon the young people's parlour or other conveniences.

(2) *Size of the class.* This is another accessory. Of recent years the Methodists have suffered by reason of an insatiable craze for numbers. The temptation of David has beset them. Success has been measured by numbers, quality has given way to quantity. It has become a question of size rather than of worth.

And the craze has touched the class-meeting. Leaders have persuaded themselves that unless they could count an average attendance of thirty or forty members, they were not succeeding. And members have grumbled if only ten or fifteen of their number have put in an appearance. Large classes have come into vogue—larger and fewer.

But this certainly is not in accordance with Wesley's practice. He was careful not to have large classes. He saw that quantity could only be had at the expense of quality ; and quality was his first concern. A leader could not possibly carry out his duties—which were many and exacting—if he was given the oversight of twenty or thirty members. Moreover, in such a class there could never be adequate time for the leader to deal with the Christian experience of each member. Wesley saw this, and consequently limited each class to a membership of twelve, including the leader. Instead of having a few large classes in a society, he followed the plan of having many small ones.

And nothing, as yet, has occurred to prove that Wesley's plan was wrong. The indications are all in the opposite direction. Wesley's small classes succeeded much better than the modern large class. It is tolerably certain that if the small class method

was reverted to, Methodism would greatly gain. This method offers every possible advantage. The leader can fulfil his duties far more satisfactorily. He can make himself intimately acquainted with each of his members and study their peculiarities and needs. He can give due time and attention to each testimony, as it is made, and escape that most unpleasant experience of being in a hurry with religious exercises. He can follow up his members during the week and also on the Sabbath, and encourage them to attend the means of grace by making them feel welcome when they do appear. And he can take an interest in their general affairs and assure them that, under all circumstances, he is their trusty friend. These things are not so easy where a class-meeting numbers twenty or thirty members, but they fall within the scope of any devout leader who has no more than the original twelve. Wesley's idea of the size of the class-meeting is still decidedly the best.

(3) *The members of the class.* The guiding rule here is variety. Now, there is reason to believe that many who are responsible for the formation of classes have not even recognized the importance of this rule yet, much less observed it. People have been nominated for membership or credentialed from other parts,

and their names have been added to those of a certain class without any regard to the question as to whether that particular class is most likely to meet their spiritual requirements. Moreover, it is unwise to have too many people of the same temperament as as members of one class. There needs to be variety. 'As no key can open all locks, so no one man possesses all talents. God distributes His gifts according to His holy will—this to one, that to another; and none is of himself sufficient for all emergencies, and independent of the help of others.' True of individuals, these words are equally true of types.

This is one of the most important factors in the ideal class-meeting. Care must be exercised in the grouping of members. There should always be persons of matured Christian experience meeting with beginners. The serious and the gay should sit side by side. The learned and the illiterate should be links in the same chain. And the rich and the poor should joy in the same God and have fellowship one with another. Variety of disposition, of standing, of experience—this is the guiding rule.

There is nothing but gain from the presence of such variety. It may be difficult to secure. It will certainly require the greatest diligence in those who are responsible for the grouping. But granted

that it exists, it will contribute immensely both to the interest and spiritual efficacy of the class-meeting. The beginner is strengthened by the ripened experience of the aged Christian, while the latter feels something of the vigour of youth as he listens to the glowing periods of the former. The despondent catches a ray of light from the sunny countenance of the member who believes in the hymn—'Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice,' while the exuberant disciple is sobered as he looks upon the sadness of his neighbour and sees mirrored in him the pathos of a race. Where there is variety of type, the class-meeting never loses interest and never fails to exert its beneficent influence. It is indeed—

> A spot where spirits blend,
> And friend holds fellowship with friend.

(4) *There is the leader.* Admittedly the leader is the key to the ideal class-meeting. The room may be perfectly adapted to the purpose, and the size of the class may be in accordance with the orthodox twelve, and the *personnel* may show the most striking variety, but if the leader is not up to the required standard everything else is spoiled. 'Exemplary personal conduct and character, gifts of speech and address in the way of appropriate counsels, a character at once impressive and conciliatory—these are the

appropriate qualifications for those who are to be at once wise in counsel, socially winning, and gifted in prayer and utterance. Thus far Methodism has produced as class-leaders a wonderful supply of such characters. *Its future continued success depends mainly on the continued supply of men and women of the like character and quality.*[1] Such a supply of leaders, men and women, is as needful as a proportionate supply of able and godly ministers.'[2]

It is impossible here to deal fully with this part of the subject. The reader is referred to the author's companion volume, *The Methodist Class-leader and His Class-leading.* A few observations must suffice for the present.

The leader must himself enjoy a clear and definite Christian experience. This qualification is absolute. Its absence cannot be excused. He is a *Lead*-er, one who goes before, who gives direction to others. But how can he possibly do this, unless he himself is familiar with the way? Armstrong well says:

> Give those who teach pure hearts and wise,
> Faith, hope, and love, all warm'd by prayer;
> Themselves first training for the skies,
> They best will raise their people there.

The leader, therefore, must know that his sins are forgiven, and that he is accepted in the beloved.

[1] The italics are the author's. [2] Dr. Rigg.

He must be quite sure that personal experience confirms personal testimony. Moreover, he must live in the uplands of the religious realm. The low-lying pastures, the little hills may do well enough for the rank-and-file, but he must outstep them; he must ascend the lofty terraces and get away from the noise and confusion of the crowd; he must tread the high planes of God and familiarize himself with the haunts of Enoch and Moses and Elijah of the Old Covenant, and of Peter and John and Paul of the New; he must be alone with God, and listen reverently to the divine unfoldings. The leader must always go before. He must have such an acquaintance with holy things and be so filled with heavenly grace that it shall be easy for him to explain spiritual difficulties and to confirm divine promises and to interpret the deep things of God. And his life must be blameless. The leader is an exemplar. He is a pattern. He is as a city set upon a hill, which cannot be hid. He, like his Lord and Master, must be able to say, 'I have set you an example that ye should do as I have done.'

There are some weighty words in the *Reformed Pastor* which Richard Baxter meant for his brethren in the ministry, but which express most effectively the primary need of the Methodist class-leader:

'Take heed to yourselves lest you should be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim the necessity of a Saviour to the world, your hearts should neglect Him, and you should miss of an interest in Him and His saving benefits. Take heed to yourself, lest you perish while you call upon others to take heed of perishing, and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare their food. Though there be a promise of shining as stars to those that turn many to righteousness, this is but on supposition that they be first turned to it themselves: such promises are made *caeteris paribus et suppositis supponendis.* Their own sincerity in the faith is the condition of their glory simply considered, though their great ministerial labours may be a condition of the promise of their greater glory. Many men have warned others that they come not to that place of torment which yet they hastened to themselves, many a preacher is now in hell that hath an hundred times called upon his hearers to use their utmost care and diligence to escape it. Can any reasonable man imagine that God should save men for offering salvation to others while they refused it themselves, and for telling others those truths which they themselves

neglected and abused? Many a tailor goes in rags that maketh costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarce licks his fingers when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes. Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher, but because he was a justified, sanctified man, and consequently faithful in his Master's work. Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade them daily to believe, and have heartily entertained that Christ and Spirit which you offer unto others.'[1]

Dr. Stalker[2] quotes the following hymn as one of the treasures of the Christian Church. The words are supposed to be by St. Patrick. They indicate, in a most striking way, this abiding requisite of the successful class-leader.

Christ with me, Christ before me,
Christ behind me, Christ within me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ at my right, Christ at my left,
Christ in the fort,
Christ in the chariot seat,
Christ in the poop,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of every man who speaks to me
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

[1] *The Reformed Pastor.*

[2] *Preacher and His Models*, p. 202

He must be full of zeal for the highest good of others. Christian people generally are expected to show this grace of charity. It is quite right that they seek 'to make their own calling and election sure.' But this must not be looked upon simply as an end. It is rather a means to an end. It is the basis upon which all beneficent ministry is reared. 'Physician, heal thyself.' Why? 'That thou mayst heal thy neighbour.' 'Let your light so shine before men, *that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*' The Apostle Paul is very emphatic about this. In his letter to the Philippians he says: 'Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.'

But this is especially the duty of the class-leader. He fills his post for the sake of others. He is, therefore, expected to interest himself in their affairs and to cherish a deep regard for their highest good. His zeal must be ardent and enduring.

Zeal is that pure and heavenly flame
The fire of love supplies;
While that which often bears the name
Is self in a disguise.
True zeal is merciful and mild,
Can pity and forbear;
The false is headstrong, fierce and wild,
And breathes revenge and war.

Zeal for the ministries of his office will constrain a leader carefully to watch over the spiritual interests of his members. Nothing will appear too irksome, too uncongenial for him. The great end of all religious endeavour—character without spot or blemish—will be before his eyes, and he will endure much for its accomplishment in each life committed to his care. Zeal, sustained by the Spirit of God, also will make him skilful in diagnosis, patient in treating the disease, and radiantly hopeful of results. It will encourage him to follow up the work done in the class-meeting with work equally valuable after the class-meeting is dispersed. He will perforce be a visitor, deeming it to be of the first importance to know how his flock live at home as well as at church. He will not forget the sick, and the sad, the defeated and the oppressed, the lonely and the despairing. These will ever be the recipients of his most tender care.

It was because this consuming zeal had taken possession of the Apostle Paul that he wrote to the Ephesians: 'For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by

faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height, and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Sanctified zeal in the cause of others, especially those who are members of his class, is absolutely necessary in the ideal leader. He cannot get on without it. Indeed, he will soon lose heart and say that the work is too exacting, and that people do not seem to appreciate his efforts on their behalf. He will play Elijah's game and beg to be relieved of such a heavy responsibility. He is even more likely to take matters into his own hands, and, of his own will, lay down the weapons of his warfare. It is the enthusiast who defies these adverse forces and flings them back upon themselves like the rocks do the surging billows of the ocean. It is the enthusiast who exclaims—

I gaze upon the thousand stars
That fill the midnight sky;
And wish, so passionately wish,
A light like theirs on high.
I have such eagerness of hope
To benefit my kind;
I feel as if immortal power
Were given to my mind.

He must be intimately acquainted with the Scriptures. The class-leader is as dependent as the preacher upon the Scriptures. He is not his own authority. He has no right to offer only his own opinions. The class-leader is God's ambassador to the members of his class. He is expected to represent God's view of life and sin and duty. And this he finds most fully in the Bible. Indeed, the Scriptures ' are given by inspiration of God, and are profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.'

The Bible is the leader's Court of Appeal. When any member is in difficulty on questions either of belief or conduct, it is in the Bible where the leader finds the vindication of the truth. He calls into requisition its revelations and instructions, and by means of them pierces the difficulty and revives confidence. The Bible is his strong tower of defence. When temptation or trial besets those for whom he is responsible, it is in the Bible where he gathers those consolations and promises which have always been as a healing ministry. And when the fillip of an arousing and invigorating exhortation is needed, it is in the same Book that the leader becomes familiar with the most effective of these. Indeed, the Word of the Lord is living, and active, and sharper than any

two-edged sword, and piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart.'

But the point which most affects the leader, and which follows as a natural course from what has been said, is that he must be *intimately acquainted* with the Scriptures. He must know his Bible from cover to cover. He must have stored up in his memory the stirring incidents of the Patriarchal age, when holy men builded their altar and sent up the smoke of a grateful sacrifice to the Lord God. He must know the story of the bondage in Egypt and of the subsequent exodus and march to the Promised Land. He must be familiar with the national history of the Jews in Palestine, of its ebbs and flows, and of the consummating events of Christ's day. The Songs of Solomon must blend their music with the praise of the psalmist, and the stirring addresses of the great prophets must play their part in driving home the earnest instructions and tender pleadings of the apostles. The Gospels, with their record of the life of the lone Son of God, are indispensable; the Epistles will supply the very best word for exhortation and advice; and the Apocalypse of St. John, with its sights and sounds of the life that is to be, is especially the land of enchantment where the leader gathers

luscious fruit for the delight and strengthening of those to whom he ministers. All parts of the Sacred Book must be equally known to this shepherd of the flock. The peculiar nature of his responsibility forbids him to regard any portion as of no importance.

The leader must surpass the preacher in his intimacy with the word. A preacher prepares his sermon before the service. In the quiet of his study he can make deliberate choice of the passages that best illustrate his meaning or emphasize his lesson. And where memory fails the concordance can be requisitioned with absolute confidence. But the leader's knowledge is drawn upon without a moment's notice. The experience of one of the members evidences great uncertainty and darkness, and the leader is required to help the distressed pilgrim and to lead him, if possible, into a broader and more certain way. He has little time to think. The meeting cannot be adjourned until he has fortified himself with appropriate passages of Scripture. He is compelled to act promptly. But unless he can see at a glance the whole landscape of the Bible, and choose exactly those features which the needs of the case require, he loses a golden opportunity of doing good; a troubled soul is left to grope about without light or guide; and his own office is dishonoured.

Mark Guy Pearse's story, *Daniel Quorm and his Religious Notions*, is delightful reading. It records the history not only of a man but also of a race. Daniel is one of a great host. As Mr. Pearse says in the preface: 'In hundreds of towns and villages, men of the humblest position are doing the highest work of the Church, in the Sunday school, in the pulpit, and in the Society class.' But in addition to history, there is illustration. Daniel Quorm, as a class-leader, shows an intimate knowledge of Scripture. When leading his class, he can quote passage after passage exactly appropriate to the experience with which he is dealing, and apparently without any mental effort whatsoever. Daniel knows his Bible so well that it has become a second alphabet to him. All the wealth of its inexhaustible treasure is stored away in the recesses of memory. And with perfect ease he takes down and uses pearl and diamond, diamond and pearl, as occasion requires. And herein is one of the conditions inseparably associated with ideal leadership. It cannot be surrendered, for it is vital. The class-leader must at least be a man of the Word.

He must have aptitude for the work of the office. It is evident that some phases of the work are very delicate and need the most careful handling. The

class-leader occupies a privileged position. He is allowed to make inquiries which from another would be regarded as impertinent. He is entrusted with confidences which members would never think of divulging to private individuals. He is called to deal with situations of the most trying kind. As a visitor, he has access to the family circle when others are denied. It is, therefore, of the utmost importance that he knows how properly to use his great influence.

Everybody has not the aptitude for leadership. There are some good people who never could succeed as leaders. Their piety is unquestionable ; it casts a halo about their life, which never fails to impress itself upon others. They are among the brighter saints of the household of faith, peers in a royal priesthood. But they are not leaders. They do not possess the qualifications that are necessary for successful leading. They are too reserved, or they are ignorant of the secret of how to deal with other people and how to approach them without offence upon questions of personal religion. To raise such people to the office of leadership is a very grave error indeed. It is unjust to themselves, for it is like trying to fit a round peg into a square hole. It causes irritation with the duties of the office, and irritation leads to disgust. But it is even more unjust to the members,

for they find themselves in the awkward position of having shepherds who do not understand the peculiarities and needs of the sheep, and who therefore do far more harm than good.

It is absolutely necessary that the ideal leader should have an aptitude for the duties of the office. He must know how to appreciate the difficulties of those to whom he ministers: he must be quick to respect their reserve: he must sympathetically enter into their joys and sorrows, and give them to feel that they can tell what is in their heart, assured that their confidence will not be betrayed: he must have the insight of a prophet, the deftness of a ministering angel, the skill of a physician, and the patience of a Job.

And he must be regular and punctual in attendance. In this respect, example is much more potent than precept. As the leader, so the class. It is useless for a leader to harangue the members upon the great advantage of attending class regularly and always being in time for the opening hymn, if he himself falls into the habit of turning up when the meeting is commenced. He must set the example. He must himself be *regular*. Of course, there are times when a leader cannot possibly attend. But these are exceptions. The plea is that, *as a rule*, the leader must be

regular. The leader's duty, as defined in the General Rules, is, ' to see each person in his class once a week.' There are some leaders who strictly reserve their class night and zealously guard it against all intrusions. If engagements clash, it is the other that is left unattended, the class-meeting has the first claim. These class-leaders conceive that there is no duty more important and no kind of meeting more urgent than their own class-meeting, and they honour it. And surely they are right. For where you have a class-meeting whose leader is regular in his attendance, you invariably find one whose prosperity and usefulness are above gainsay.

But *punctuality* is also imperative. It is well for the leader to be at the place of meeting at least ten minutes before the time to begin. He is the proper person to extend a welcome to the members. It is his business to see that the room is quite ready and that the members are comfortably placed. And it is for him to provide hymn-books for each one. A dilatory leader is a snare to the best interests of the class. Unpunctuality is bad in business. It is equally bad in religion. Fancy twelve people assembled in a class-room, anxious to make the most of the time they have snatched from home-duties or business claims, waiting for the leader! Can any-

thing be more injurious to the welfare of the class? Such delay kills the spirit of devotion and puts people into bad humour. Those who have had such an unfortunate experience are bound to admit that it takes all interest out of the service, breaks confidence in the leader, and ultimately brings disaster to the class.

Regular and punctual attendance on the part of the leader is indispensable. Everything in a class-meeting depends upon a good start, and a good start can only be made when the leader, alert and fully prepared, is in his place and ready to extend a hearty welcome to the members as they severally arrive.

Such are some of the necessary qualifications for successful leadership. The list is not exhaustive. But these, perhaps, are the most important. Dr. Sutherland says: 'If the leader is formal and unsympathetic, the spiritual life of the members will not rise to a high level; but, if he is earnest and faithful, the members will partake of the same spirit. Once let it be known that a particular class is the scene of frequent spiritual triumphs, a place where flagging zeal is kindled afresh, and souls are born into the kingdom of God, and it will not be long before the place of meeting will become too strait to accommodate the numbers who will desire admission.

Besides, a leader who is thoroughly in earnest will not be content to conduct a formal service with the small number who may choose to attend of their own accord. He will remember that it is the leader's duty, as defined in the General Rules, "to see each person in his class once a week at least, in order to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort or exhort, as occasion may require." '

Dr. Rigg has some very apposite remarks about the qualifications of the leader in his *Class-meeting Fellowship*.[1] 'It is not enough that the leader meets his class regularly and is able to give suitable counsel to the members of his class individually. He ought also to be their personal friend and the home friend of their family. His suggestions and responses in the class-meeting should be apt and homely as well as godly. Such aptness in guidance, in counsel, in comfort, when needed, can only be assured by means of occasional home-visitation and personal friendship. He should be a sort of sub-pastor to his class-members. And this will not be attained without free and friendly relations outside of the class, as well as within the class-room. . . . The successful class-leader, like the preacher who is at once edifying and popular, must use homely

[1] pp. 25-27.

language, and touch at once the understanding and the inmost sympathy of his earnest class-members. He should be ready with Scripture quotation, with homely illustration, and with illustrations from the hymn-book. Such leaders will be deacons of St. Paul's school, workmen that need not be ashamed, building up the Church of Christ. And the great means and instrument of their success in edifying the Church—their success, that is to say, as Church builders—will be the combination of wise and homely counsel with a godly and loving life, a true Christian friendship, modest and discreet, but loving and faithful.'

(5) *Conduct of the meeting.* It is about questions of conduct that so much difference of opinion exists. All Methodists who have any interest in the subject agree that the 'conduct' is vital to the prosperity of the class; but when they proceed to say what method of conduct shall be adopted they fall into hopeless confusion. And yet there must be a right method, there must be solid rock somewhere upon which all parties can find a sure foundation. It will, perhaps, be best to deal with a few general principles of *conduct* before passing on to details.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF CONDUCT.

Brevity. The class-meeting is no place for long

exercises. Undue length is another of the causes that have brought about its declination. Leaders have allowed the meeting to drag on until some of the members have been anxious about the late hour, while others have felt thoroughly fatigued. Both experiences and responses have fallen into the same error. Too often they are like so many short addresses. But it is a serious mistake. Leaders and members need to remember and to resolve—

> Since brevity is the soul of wit,
> And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
> I will be brief.

A class-meeting should never extend beyond one hour and a quarter. It is even better strictly to confine it to the hour. Of course, where Wesley's rule for the size of the class is ignored, there may be a difficulty. One hour will seem much too short a time for twenty or thirty people to give their experience. But this only proves the wisdom of adhering to the original twelve. Assume that this is the size of the class, and then one hour will afford abundant opportunity for all to take part and for a little prayer in addition. It is much better to have a short, responsive meeting, at the close of which the members feel it has been all too short, than to drag on until every one is tired and sighs for the benediction.

But experiences must also be brief. There is no

need for members to compass the globe and to speak 'of things in the heaven above and in the earth beneath and in the waters under the earth.' It is quite sufficient for them to tell, clearly and expeditiously, what they have 'felt and seen' of the grace of God since last they met together. Some members are fearfully garrulous. The leader is at a loss to know how to restrain them. But he cannot escape the dilemma. The existence of the class is at stake, for garrulous members are a snare. He must emphasize, both by precept and example, the need of brevity.

The responses of the leader must be of the same character. A Methodist minister was inquiring into the condition of the class-meeting at one of the societies on his circuit. He was told that it had ceased to exist in all but name. He waited upon the members separately to discover, if possible, why this was so. Every member told him that the fault lay with the leader. When he came to respond to the members' experiences he invariably preached a little sermon. Some declared that he took at least ten minutes with each response. The minister saw at once that the members were quite right in laying the charge against the leader. No class can prosper under such conditions. The leader misunderstands the duties of his office who takes up the time of the service in

this way. He *must* exercise brevity. And, indeed, there is no need that he should be any other than brief. Of the true leader it might well be said :

> The spell is thine that reaches
> The heart, and makes the wisest head its sport ;
> And there's one rare, strange virtue in thy speeches,
> The secret of their mastery—they are short.

Brightness. Daniel Quorm has some very timely advice upon the need of *brightness* in the class-meeting. He tells of his own experience, and how the morbid disposition of his old class-leader made him often wish that the service was over. ' I was a young lad, so full o' joy as ever I could live, and my heart singin' to God all day long. And then I used to go up to the class, and it took all the music out o' me, like granny's finery over the canary, and I couldn't do more than speak a bit instead of singing at all. Why, first of all he'd give out a hymn—one o' them for " mourners " like this—

> Woe is me ! what tongue can tell
> My sad afflicted state !
> Who my anguish can reveal,
> Or all my woes relate !

And then they'd sing to it " Josiah," so slow as if they was to a berrin.'

Daniel felt all the exuberant joy of his young life protest against such a caricature of Christian fellow-

ship. The class-meeting was not intended to be a sepulchre but a mercy-seat, not a house of mourning but a guest-chamber of sparkling joy and overflowing life. It is a grave mistake to exclude this element of cheerfulness. On the other hand, everything should be done briefly and brightly. Especially should the leader cultivate brightness. He will then give tone to the whole service, and the weary and heavy-laden will surely feel that life's antidote is in this house of healing, and that sorrow and sighing are made to flee away. To return to Daniel's Notions, he says, 'Talk about class-meetin's, and people not comin' to 'em; why, the reason is pretty much the same as I was a-tellin' Bob Byles's wife the other days, that it wasn't all his fault that he was home so little, and at the public-house so often. If one kept a bright fire-place, and a snug corner, and a pleasant smile for him at home, he would be tempted oftener to stay at home. We leaders must keep the place bright and cheerful and attractive if we want to keep the members. Why, I should every bit as soon think o' goin' to class with the wax an' the grease on my hands, as soon think o' goin' with my apron on and in my shirt sleeves, as think o' takin' all my cares and worries. I get away first of all and lose all my own fears and troubles in the lovin' care of my Heavenly

Father. I get my own heart put into tune, and then the rest'll take the right pitch from me. And then with the fire burnin' I get away to meetin'. We always begin with a good, cheerful hymn—one o' them that do stir up your soul, and a good old tune that you can sing without thinkin' about it, because you do know it so well. Give me a 'trumpet metre' to 'Arise, my soul, arise!' or dear old 'Jerusalem,' to the hymn—

> My God, the spring of all my joys,
> The life of my delights,
> The glory of my brightest days,
> And comfort of my nights!

Bless 'ee, why, by the time you're gone through that, and had a bit o' downright earnest prayer, the fire is burnin' in every heart, and you're all aglow with holy joy.'

The question of hymn-singing is exceedingly important. And, fortunately, every branch of Methodism is well supplied with splendid hymns. Charles Wesley's hymns continue pre-eminent. Methodists love them. They express their belief, offer their worship, joy in God, and repeat their prayers in the sweet cadence of their verse. And these hymns are invaluable to the successful class-meeting. It is well for leaders to make the most of their advantage here. They can always give tone

to the service by striking up a verse of one of these hymns. And members also can utilize favourite lines to state their own experience.

On the question of the best choice of hymns and the rules which should be observed, the following remarks of Dr. Dale may be helpful to leaders. They apply particularly to preachers, but leaders also may well ponder them :—

' Some act on the principle that a service should be a perfect unity, and their hymns are as far as possible in the same tone as their sermons. I venture to think that this principle is a false one, and that, speaking generally and leaving special occasions to be governed by a special rule, the hymns should be complementary to the sermon both in subject and feeling. It is unwise to keep the mind and hearts of the people under a monotonous strain for an hour and a half. They become weary, and it is a relief to them when the service closes. There are great varieties of mood, of external condition, and of spiritual interest in the congregation, which we ought to try to recognize. . . . When I am at home, if the sermon is hard and logical, I like to have two or three hymns throbbing with emotion ; and if the sermon is predominantly ethical, I look for hymns which give free play to lofty spiritual thought and

desire; if the sermon is meant for light-hearted, happy people, who are in full vigour of their strength, I generally take care that there is at least one hymn for the weary and the sorrowful.'

Brotherliness. It has already been pointed out that Wesley was very anxious that the class-meeting should bring together the members of the various societies in the closest bonds of union. Social distinctions were to be forgotten. In the class-room there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is all and in all.' And the history of the class-meeting shows that Wesley's desire has been more than fulfilled. Rich and poor, young and old, learned and illiterate have sat side by side in the class-meeting, and helped to build each other up. And this spirit of brotherliness is an abiding requisite. Some time ago the following incident occurred in a Methodist Conference. It was the election of the Vice-President, and rival parties were anxious to secure the success of their own nominee. One person moved that Sir So-and-So be appointed to the vice-chair, and, in doing so, he told the Conference of the many excellent virtues of this worthy knight. A second person urged the claims of a J.P. from the north. After a while, an elderly minister rose, and turning to the President

said, ' Mr. President, I move that *Brother* So-and-So do take the vice-chair.' The word caught the ear and moved the heart of the Conference, and *Brother* So-and-So was elected.

And it is this realization of Christian brotherhood that is so essential to a good class-meeting. The leader does not know His Worship, the Mayor, or Sir Patrick of——, or Squire Hargreaves. He has only one word of address, for landlord and peasant, for scholar and labourer, for rich and poor, and that word is Brother ! The members, too, when in the class-room, forget all accidental distinctions and follow the example of the leader. They have also one word of address, i.e. Brother. And this feature of the class-meeting cannot be surrendered. There must be the spirit of brotherliness. Only then will people of diverse circumstances agree to meet together, and reciprocate those great blessings which are associated with Christian fellowship.

Brief, Bright and Brotherly—the three B's. They have served to differentiate other assemblies of the Church ; but they belong really to the class-meeting. They stand for the three abiding principles, without which this means of grace cannot continue. For of all the institutions which are sustained by Methodism, this especially must be marked by Brevity, Brightness, and Brotherliness.

DETAILS OF CONDUCT

This part of the subject especially marks the sphere of controversy. So far as the *General Principles* are concerned, they probably will be accepted without demur. But who shall say as to what is the best method to conduct the class-meeting? Counsellors are many: one contends for a certain method, while another urges the claims of what he considers to be a great improvement. A few suggestions on the matter may not be out of place, though they are offered not as a solution but as aids to the solution of a long-felt problem.

(1) The leader must lead. In some cases he invites one of the members to do this. His motive, of course, in so doing is good. He thinks that by this means he will enlist the deeper interest of the members; but the procedure is very questionable. Most people who have observed the experiment agree that it is detrimental to the real prosperity of the class. It is the duty of the leader to lead. If he cannot possibly be present, then he should depute the assistant leader to take his place. And under no circumstance should this detail be laid aside. The leader is appointed to his office for this express purpose. His brother-officers believe that he is qualified for the post, that he possesses the gifts and graces that

are so essential. They have not the same opinion of the members. Indeed, they have not even inquired into the qualifications of these. They are only members. But so far as the leader is concerned, he is adjudged to be the proper man for the post, and the officers appoint him with the expectation that he will discharge the duties. And he must regularly and patiently discharge them himself, and not by proxy.

Moreover, the members decidedly prefer it. When they go to class, they expect to find the leader in his place. They want to find him there, for they feel that he can help them in their need, and open up to their gaze some of the glorious realities of the unseen. And they resent an intruder. They may not show their resentment, but it is there all the same. And the meeting loses its power and efficacy for them. More than once the observation has been heard, 'Had I known that So-and-So was to lead, I should not have come.' There is a close intimacy between the leader and the members, and it rightly counts for much. There may be sentiment about it, but even sentiment must not be ignored. Observation and experience alike emphasize the great importance of the leader regularly leading.

(2) The principal place of the service must be reserved for personal testimony. This is the differen-

tiating mark of a class-meeting, and remains indispensable. The leader will do well to take the members in order and carefully to inquire of their religious state and then as carefully to counsel and exhort. In spite of the fears and alarms that are sometimes raised with regard to the observances of this feature, it belongs to the ideal class-meeting, and is capable of rendering immense service. It is the one feature which lays emphasis upon the present tense of the Christian life. By its means, members are encouraged to exercise healthy introspection, to examine how far they have gained or lost since last they met together, and to know themselves in the light of the glory of God.

(3) And there must be variety. Of course this follows from the argument for brightness. But it is so important that it well deserves to be re-emphasized. Meetings are sometimes spoiled because of an intolerable sameness. They are always conducted along similar lines, people repeat worn-out phrases, the leader announces the few familiar hymns. The result is that the meetings become irksome and are in time neglected. Variety is of the first importance for real success. It is here where room may be found for well considered modifications. For instance, there is no reason why the class-meeting should always

open with a hymn. Many prefer this way, but it is quite legitimate to commence with prayer or a few verses of Scripture. And then, always providing that personal testimony is duly observed, once a month the evening might be spent in prayer for God's blessing on the work of the Church generally, followed next month with an evening of prayer on behalf of Foreign Missions. But it must never be forgotten that the class-meeting is not a prayer-meeting. Certainly the Scriptures should find a place in every meeting. A few verses from the Sacred Book tend to arrest attention and to inspire a deeper spirit of devotion. The leader must, of necessity, be allowed considerable freedom. Only let the general principles be strictly observed, and those details watched which have to do with the leader's place and the pre-eminence of Christian testimony and the danger of an oppressive sameness, and then the leader, if his heart be in the work, will make his own service and find unmeasured delight in every exercise of it.

The following is an order of service for the class-meeting which has stood the test of a long and varied trial. Wherever it has been adopted, the class-meeting has continued to be as a 'well of water in a dry and thirsty land.' It postulates a leader who is

in earnest, members who prize the fellowship of the saints, and a class of the orthodox size of twelve. The service starts punctually, and is concluded within the hour and a quarter.

7.30 Opening Hymn—to be of a cheerful character.
7.35 Short invocation, with the class repeating the Lord's Prayer.
7.40 Hymn—not more than three verses.
7.45 Short suitable Scripture reading.
7.55 Hymn, on Christian fellowship—not more than three verses.
8.0 Four testimonies, including the leader's, with the leader's responses.
A short chorus.
8.10 Four more testimonies, &c.
A short chorus.
8.20 Four more testimonies, &c.
8.30 Leader's general observations, and prayer *for* the members.
8.35 Hymn, four verses, followed by the roll-call.
8.40 Two short prayers by members.
8.45 Benediction by the leader.

In the first week of each month, the meeting is devoted to prayer, one month for the Church generally and the next month for Foreign Missions.

OF THE PRACTICABLE

IT only remains to say that the ideal class-meeting is also the practicable. Sometimes the ideal is the impracticable. Then the vision of it may as easily depress as inspirit. People are conscious that they are looking upon something which is very fascinating, but which can never be actually realized. And the comparison of this with the present produces discontent. But in the case of the class-meeting, there is no such impassable gulf between the ideal and the practicable. Indeed, the one is only the active and complete expression of the other.

Of course, there may be instances where all the details of the ideal cannot immediately be adopted. For example, some classes have no choice in the matter of the place of meeting. They belong to poor societies, it is impossible to provide suitable accommodation, funds will not allow of this; and so they are compelled to make the best of what they find. Then,

in the grouping of members in accordance with the idea of variety of disposition, this may not always be possible. Small societies have only one class-meeting, and *all* the members belong to it. It would never do to form several classes in these small societies, for this would mean weakness. Classes with four members are as much in conflict with the ideal as classes with forty members. But these disabilities do not prove that the details in question are impracticable. They are merely temporary inconveniences which prevent the practicable being realized, and may disappear at any moment. It is quite true to say that in the case of the class-meeting, the ideal *is* the practicable.

. . . . . .

But in bringing the ideal into the realm of the actual, method of procedure is very important. Suppose a leader determines to take the ideal and to fashion his own class-meeting in accordance with it, how shall he proceed ? He may not be able to adopt the ideal *en bloc*. What then ? Must he renounce the whole because, for the time being, he can only attempt the part ? Certainly not. A certain congregation was very anxious to enter upon some forward mission work. It had succeeded in meeting all the financial liabilities of its own Church property and was in th

full tide of a great religious revival. Hence its desire to find new spheres of work for Christ and His Church. The congregation purchased a site in one of the suburbs of the town and instructed the architect to prepare plans for a suitable structure. But when the plans were presented and the probable cost of the property was named, everybody felt that the sum was beyond their immediate resources. The plans met with general commendation; the structure suggested was ideal. Therefore, instead of sending them back to the architect and requiring him to prepare something at half the cost, the congregation wisely decided to divide the scheme into three parts and to build sectionally. The policy justified itself. To-day, there is a splendid block of buildings on that site, complete and symmetrical in every way. This is the method of procedure for the class-leader to follow. First let him establish that part of the ideal class-meeting which is absolutely necessary—that is to say, let him organize his meeting as a place where certain Christian people can assemble for personal testimony. Then to this let him add detail after detail of the ideal, as opportunity permits. In due course he will most certainly have the satisfaction of seeing the complete ideal actualized in his weekly gathering.

But, however practicable the ideal may be, it is not likely to become actualized as it might, unless Methodists cherish an increasingly ardent love for the class-meeting. In these days there is a significant move towards more definite Christian fellowship. Churches feel the need of it more than ever. They appreciate its value for the well-being of the convert and the tempted, as also for Mr. Great-heart, who risks all in defence of the Right. A Congregational minister recently said to a Methodist superintendent: 'I envy you your class-meeting. When I have the joy to know that some one of my congregation has found the light and accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour, I have no means of grace distinctly suitable to the immediate needs of the case. I want a service where Christian faith is strengthened and the higher graces are cultured and personal testimony is encouraged. I envy you your class-meeting. It is just the thing!' Surely, then, Methodists will not love the less an institution the value of which is evident to all who care to examine it. They will be well advised rather to cherish a more consuming love for it. For love ever reaches after and yearns for the object of its fascination.

The thing we long for, that we are,
For one transcendent moment,
Before the Present poor and bare
Can make its sneering comment.

Still, through our paltry stir and strife
Glows down the wish'd Ideal,
And Longing moulds in clay what Life
Carves in the marble Real;
To let the new life in, we know,
Desire must ope the portal;
Perhaps the longing to be so
Helps make the soul immortal.

Longing is God's fresh heavenward will,
With our poor earthward striving;
We quench it that we may be still
Content with merely living;
But, would we learn that heart's full scope
Which we are hourly wronging,
Our lives must climb from hope to hope,
And realize the longing.

LOWELL.

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
Who joins us by His grace,
And bids us, each to each restored,
Together seek His face.

He bids us build each other up;
And, gathered into one,
To our high calling's glorious hope,
We hand in hand go on.

The gift which He on one bestows,
We all delight to prove;
The grace through every vessel flows,
In purest streams of love.

E'en now we think and speak the same,
And cordially agree;
United all through Jesu's name,
In perfect harmony.

We all partake the joy of one,
The common peace we feel;
A peace to sensual minds unknown,
A joy unspeakable.

And if our fellowship below
In Jesus be so sweet,
What heights of rapture shall we know
When round His throne we meet!

C. WESLEY.

IN PREPARATION.

By the same Author.

THE METHODIST CLASS-LEADER

AND

HIS CLASS-LEADING

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